

CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Skepticism in Classical Islam

Moments of confusion

Paul L. Heck



Skepticism in Classical Islam

The first major treatment of skepticism in Islam, this book explores the critical role of skeptical thinking in the development of theology in Islam. It examines the way key thinkers in classical Islam faced perplexing questions about the nature of God and his relation to the world, all the while walking a fine line between belief in God's message as revealed in the Qur'an, and the power of the mind to discover truths on its own.

Skepticism in Classical Islam reveals how doubt was actually an integral part of scholarly life at this time. Skepticism is by no means synonymous with atheism. It is, rather, the admission that one cannot convincingly demonstrate a truth claim with certainty, and Islam's scholars, like their counterparts elsewhere, acknowledged such impasses, only to be inspired to find new ways to resolve the conundrums they faced. Whilst their conundrums were unique, their admission of the limits of knowledge shares much with other scholarly traditions.

Seeking to put Islam on the map of the broader study of the history of skepticism, this book will be of interest to scholars and students of Religion, History and Philosophy.

Paul L. Heck is associate professor in the Department of Theology at Georgetown University, specializing in the intellectual history of Islam. His research focuses on the development of theological discourse in Islam and its relation to Christianity, highlighting the dynamic interaction between the two religious traditions.

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Preface

This is the first major treatment of skepticism in Islam. As such, it seeks to stimulate deeper thinking about the dynamic of theological discourse in classical Islam and also to introduce Islam into the broader study of the history of skepticism. The goal has been to bring new perspective to the scholarly production of key thinkers in classical Islam (ninth–thirteenth centuries), who faced perplexing questions about the nature of God and his relation to the world, all the while walking a fine line between belief in God’s message as revealed in the Qur’an and the power of the mind to discover truths on its own—and sometimes in contradiction to the literal wordings of scripture. This study, then, reveals how doubt (skeptical thinking) was actually integral to the scholarly life in classical Islam and the development of religious reasoning from one period to the next.

Skepticism is by no means the same as atheism. It is, rather, the admission that one cannot convincingly demonstrate a truth claim with certainty, and Islam’s scholars, like their counterparts in other times and places, acknowledged such impasses, only to be inspired by them to find new ways to resolve the conundrums they faced. While their conundrums were unique, their admission of the limits of knowledge shares much with other scholarly traditions. It is my hope that this study will encourage others to venture beyond conventional assumptions about the nature of religious reasoning and explore more closely how skepticism is very much part of the venture.

The acknowledgements I owe are too many to be listed. I express my deep gratitude to my colleagues from the several institutions with which I have been affiliated over the years: The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at the University of Chicago, The Department of History and Faculty of Islamic Law at Jordan University, The Society of Fellows at Princeton University, The Department of Theology and Religious Studies at John Carroll University, The Department of Islamic Studies at Muhammad V University, and the Department of Theology at Georgetown University. I would like to thank the following colleagues in particular for inviting me to present different aspects of this study at their institutions: Sebastian Günther at Göttingen University, Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen at University of Paris, and Jonathan Smolin at Dartmouth University. Needless to say, all errors and shortcomings are my own. I dedicate this monograph to my students.

Paul L. Heck
Washington, DC
2 April 2013

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Introduction

Skepticism in Islam

It is not usual to associate skepticism with Islam. Believers are not supposed to be perplexed. This study seeks to shed light on the place of Islam in the history of skepticism. Over the centuries, Islam's scholars, as their counterparts elsewhere, faced puzzling questions about the nature of God and his relation to the world. Their inability to resolve such questions required paradigm shifts: new approaches in religious thinking were needed to deal with unsolved ambiguities. This, in turn, spurred the development of doctrine in Islam. In this study, we seek insight into the phenomenon of skepticism in Islam in its classical period, which stretched from the founding of Baghdad in the eighth century to its destruction at the hands of the Mongols in the thirteenth. It was a time of enlightenment when piety encouraged scientific inquiry but it was also a time of doubt and skeptical reservations about what could be known with certainty in the arena of theology. The scholarly writings of the period indicate that alongside the great confidence of Islam's scholars in the power of knowledge, there was also recognition that final conclusions remained elusive.

This does not mean that Islam's scholars did not try to resolve the conundrums they faced. The story of skepticism in Islam is as much a drive for certainty as an admission of confusion, and the scholarly virtuosi of the period, in seeking to respond to the perplexities of the day, did much to animate the scholastic life of classical Islam. One of the central conclusions of this study is that skepticism in Islam was never isolated or self-standing but was, rather, a key point of reference within a scholastic milieu where theological questions were endlessly debated. There were always contradictory views and thus there was confusion about final claims to truth within the very circles that sought to attain certainty. The emergence of a formal school of skepticism in Islam never happened. We do have signs of one gestating from the ninth through the eleventh centuries, as we will see, but it never became established as a recognizable school. Still, this study demonstrates that skepticism was always a force at work within the scholarly history of Islam. It is in this sense that the history of skepticism in Islam may contribute to our understanding of the broader history of skepticism, inviting us to reconsider whether skeptical thinking in other contexts—ancient or modern—has ever

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been fully self-standing or whether it is better viewed more as a vital point of reference stimulating even greater efforts to answer the questions and enigmas about the nature of reality.

Skepticism is by no means a singular phenomenon. It can be a strategy used to cast suspicion on a rival's viewpoints. It can be a way of life where one affirms the truth of equally compelling but mutually contradictory points of view. More specifically, however, it is recognition that some questions cannot be fathomed by the human mind. This could lead some to embrace mystery, the reverent conclusion that there are some things about God we simply cannot know. It could lead others to reject final conclusions for some if not all matters. Does it matter whether a Muslim believes the Qur'an—as God's speech—is created or uncreated (that is, eternal as God is eternal)? Does it matter whether a Muslim believes the universe is created or eternal so long as he believes in God and the Day of Judgment? The fact that the Qur'an is silent on these two issues offers grounds for being a believer while maintaining reservations about the created or uncreated status of the Qur'an and the nature of the universe. One can believe and—at least for some questions—still say, “I do not know” (*lā adrī*). A maxim from the classical period spoke of three kinds of knowledge: a clear (as opposed to ambiguous) verse of scripture, a well-attested hadith (saying of the Prophet), and “I do not know.”¹

Skepticism, then, is not atheism. It need not even imply dissent or non-conformity. It is part of the process of human inquiry, and this was also true of scholastic life in classical Islam. Indeed, skepticism took different forms within Islam from one century to the next during the period of our survey. Our goal is to introduce Islam more fully into the history of skepticism without asking it to conform to the contours of skepticism in other times and places, notably Ancient Greece and Modern Europe, which are often held up as exemplars of skeptical expression. Islam, of course, was as much heir to Plato and Aristotle as it was to Muhammad—thanks to the translation of much of Greco-Hellenistic philosophy into the language of the Arabs beginning as early as the eighth and ninth centuries. Here, however, we focus on particular questions within the theological discourse in classical Islam that hardly caused scholars to abandon belief but did challenge them to admit the limitations of reasoning—and thus what we can know with certainty—about the true realities of God, God's relation to the world, and, indeed, all things.

The reader who hopes to be told how the skeptical heritage of Ancient Greece took shape in Arabic should stop right here. As noted, works of Greco-Hellenistic philosophy passed into Arabic with considerable impact on scholastic discourse in Islam. But Islam's scholars were by no means parrots. They made use of the tools of philosophy. Indeed, in this period, it is difficult to draw a sharp distinction between philosophical and theological reflection.² However, Islam's scholars faced conundrums that Plato and Aristotle did not. This is the point. Skepticism is not a static phenomenon that exists uniformly across contexts. Elements of the skeptical heritage of Ancient Greece did

appear in classical Islam, and other studies will enrich our understanding of skepticism in Islam by exploring them. But it would be wrong to reduce Islam's scholars to carbon copies of their intellectual forebears in Ancient Greece or to suggest that they entertained doubts only when they realized that peoples before them had done so. Here, then, the goal is to explore the contours of skepticism in Islam on its own terms without dismissing the impact of other cultures. No civilization, after all, stands alone. The study of skepticism in Islam will necessarily take various approaches. Here, our goal is to look at the phenomenon from one angle—how questions particular to Islam defied resolution. Skepticism, then, was no foreign intrusion but grew organically out of Islam's own discourse. Even if they used rhetorical strategies known from Ancient Greece, Muslims did not need to think like Greeks to gain insight into the limitations of knowledge about God.

Not all of the conundrums faced by Islam's scholars were unique to Islam. Doubts about the power of logic to establish the truth of reality exist across a number of contexts, as does confusion about the causal order of the world. Islam's scholars shared these perplexities, but it is also important to emphasize the historical specificity of doubt. The perplexities of classical Islam were not, for example, those of antebellum America when abolitionists began to look askance at a scripture—long the source of cherished belief—that seemed to concede the existence of slavery.³ The puzzling questions of classical Islam were also not those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when people began to wonder how it could be equally true that man had his origins in God and also in lower primates.⁴ Such issues, abolitionism and evolutionism, were simply not on the table during the classical age of Islam. Every age has its conundrums, but they take shape within a historical context, and this is no less true in the case of classical Islam.

This study underscores the fact that skepticism does not belong exclusively to the history of philosophy. Skeptical arguments, casting doubt on dogmatic assertions (which, after all, can be theological as well as philosophical), are not limited to philosophical circles in a narrow sense but extend to those who embrace the idea of a revealed message from God. The existence of skepticism alongside belief is more common than we might think. Various kinds of skepticism have been ascribed to scholars in the Christian West who were not only philosophers but also churchmen, including Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64), Lorenzo Valla (1407–57), and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94).⁵ To be sure, believers may be less inclined to remain in doubt. They may pray that doubts pass. But they are not less ready to face doubt. That believers have had (and continue to have) doubts about dogmatic teachings of one kind or another speaks to the fact that faith is by no means blind but must be compelling to the mind no less than the heart. Is commitment to religious teachings necessarily divorced from a corresponding commitment to rationality? Beliefs need to be challenged and not simply inherited if they are to be worth anything. A strongly skeptical attitude toward inherited beliefs can be found in Islam as early as the Qur'an, which uses skeptical argumentation of a kind

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in its engagement with its varied audience. Are the idols people implore for help not creatures themselves and thus unable either to benefit or to harm those who worship them? One should think before accepting belief in them simply because one's fathers did. The figure of Abraham is emblematic of this skepticism, as he rejected the idolatrous beliefs of his people and conducted his own rational search for God based on observations of his surroundings as seen in the following verses:

Remember when Abraham said to his father Azar: "Do you take idols for gods? I see you and your people to be in manifest error." Thus We showed Abraham the kingdom of the heavens and earth so that he might be among those with certainty. When the night grew dark upon him, he saw a star and said: "This is my Lord." When it set, he said: "I do not love things that set." When he saw the moon rise, he said: "This is my Lord." When it set, he said: "Unless my Lord guides me, I shall be among the people in error." When he saw the sun rise, he said: "This is my Lord. This is greater." When it set, he said: "O people, I am innocent of all that you associate [with God]. I have turned my face to the One who created the heavens and earth."

(Q 6:74–79)

Other verses in the Qur'an seem to call people to be skeptical about the beliefs they have inherited from their forefathers, such as the following two:

If it is said to them, "Follow what Allah has revealed." They say, "No, but we follow the familiar ways of our fathers." Even if their fathers did not grasp anything and were not guided [by God]?

(Q 2:170)

In a similar fashion, even before you [Muhammad], when We [God] sent a warner among a settled populace, its wealthy members said, "We found our fathers with a communal way of life, and we will follow in their footsteps." He [the warner] said, "Even if I brought you better guidance than that which you found your fathers following?" They said, "We reject that with which you have been sent."

(Q 43:23–24)

The idea of accepting beliefs by inheritance (or on the authority of others, known as *taqlīd*) was a perennial concern in scholastic discourse across Islam's theological schools.⁶ Indeed, in the classical period, it was broadly held that faith was not sound unless one could make rational sense of it. This, however, was only to bring people greater certainty about what they believed. Scholars came to define a believer as one who could defend his beliefs by reasoned argumentation. The idea of living according to inherited beliefs was anathema to scholastic circles. Even if the beliefs one inherited were true, one could only

be classified as a believer once one understood them. This attitude, in turn, periodically led scholars to raise questions about the believing status of common people unable to grasp the arguments behind the beliefs of Islam. In principle, then, Muslims had a religious duty not to accept teachings about the ways of God without question.⁷ However, in contrast, there were conundrums that even Islam's scholarly elite never decisively resolved—conundrums about the nature of God, the uniqueness of Islam, and the relation of the creator to his creatures. This did not turn scholars into atheists. Indeed, belief in God offers a position from which to cast doubts upon any final claim a human being might make to total knowledge of God and his ways in relation to the world. There is always leverage, then, for a believer to challenge dogma. In this sense, a scholar who is unsatisfied with the prevailing views of his day will have license to consider it anew. This is true of religious inquiry as well as science despite the differences in methodology between the two. Indeed, in this study, as will be seen, we are only able to understand the theological anxieties of the period by examining the works of those scholars who sought to establish new paradigms for thinking about God that could accommodate if not decisively resolve the intractable questions of their day.

What is skepticism, and can we apply the term to Islam? The fact that it has long been closely associated with Ancient Greece and Modern Europe makes it difficult for us to imagine that it might exist in other forms. Is it not a projection to apply it to Islam? We balk, for example, when terms such as “renaissance” or “humanism” are applied to Islam since they commonly refer to a specific moment in the history of Europe.⁸ However, it is myopic to conclude that humanist aspects of the Italian Renaissance, which was hardly atheist or secularist in nature, cannot be found in other times and places. This is even more the case with skepticism since, as will be seen, Islam's scholars and *littérateurs* made use of specific language to describe the varied skeptical dispositions of their day. In this sense, use of the concept can offer us greater insight into Islam's scholarly life. The problem is not the application of the concept to Islam but rather the contemporary assumption that skepticism implies atheism or secularism. Indeed, in all contexts, skeptical reservation has never been far from—and often goes hand-in-hand with—scholastic thought (that is, dogmatic assertions). Why are we more willing to apply the concept of dogmatic thinking to Islam (or religion in general) than that of skepticism?

Skepticism has a rich and varied history.⁹ Socrates deployed skeptical argumentation in his wide-ranging discussions as set down in writing by Plato. The ancient world recognized a school of skepticism, the views of which have been transmitted to us in the writings of Cicero (first century BCE) and Sextus Empiricus (first and second centuries CE), among others. There were different trends in this school. One was associated with Pyrrho of Elis (fourth century BCE), who maintained that nothing could be said about the true reality of things. His call was not to deny the existence of truth but to suspend judgment about claims to truth, neither affirming nor denying

dogmatic assertions about the ultimate nature of reality. Skepticism here was a way of life whereby one was guided by appearances rather than claims about the true nature of the reality behind such appearances. A later trend, associated with Plato's Academy, set itself in opposition to Epicurean and especially Stoic thinking. Here, the goal was not simply to attain mental tranquility by suspending judgment on questions that could never be satisfactorily resolved but rather to argue against the existence of certain knowledge of any kind. This was not skepticism as a way of life but, ironically, almost as a dogma of its own.

Another brand of skepticism that has also received a significant amount of attention is that of Europe in its early modern period. The writings of Sextus Empiricus, once recovered, gave voice to emergent suspicions about the scholastic manner of theological reasoning that prevailed in the so-called pre-modern period.¹⁰ It was, then, a Christian form of skepticism that encouraged the rise of humanistic approaches to theology alongside scholastic ones.¹¹ However, at least more popularly, it is common to think of the towering figures of skepticism in Christian Europe of the modern period as heralds of secularism. Is that how they saw what they were doing? Figures who deployed skeptical argumentation for one purpose or another, such as Descartes, were certainly forerunners of modern scientific thinking, but only in hindsight can we think of them as secularists. Indeed, their skepticism was as much functional as it was existential. That is, it was not outright denial of truth claims but rather a stratagem to reconsider them within a new paradigm.

It is no longer tenable to think of skepticism as the work of irreligious personalities undertaken to liberate themselves from religious authorities. Skepticism, we now know, is hardly limited to the "enlightened" ages of Ancient Greece and Modern Europe, past moments often taken as prototypes of contemporary secularism. The medieval period in Europe, generally perceived as a time of unquestioning faith, also had its brands of skepticism.¹² Scholars associated with church circles made use of skeptical methods to call into question the supremacy of Aristotle's standards for certainty. Only by first casting doubt on prevailing methods of learning could scholastic thinkers of Europe advance their own.¹³ This was also the case in classical Islam. Knocking down ambiguous forms of piety was but one part of a larger venture that had as its final goal the construction of more compelling arguments.

It is therefore necessary to look to circles of pious learning for evidence of skepticism no less than those of ancient and modern science. We now have studies that trace modern doubts about the existence of God not to the efforts of anti-establishment figures but rather to skeptical strategies within dominant religious communities. For example, piety-minded scholars in France of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, anticipating the challenges of potential skeptics, developed skeptical arguments for the purpose of refuting them. Ironically, the arguments they attributed to their imaginary opponents made sense and helped to sow the seeds of the very doubts they had intended to dispel.¹⁴ Indeed, over the modern period, skepticism was used to defend the

faith as much as to dethrone it. By casting doubt on the power of the mind, one could argue, as Pascal did against the philosophy of Descartes, that certain knowledge of God comes only from scripture and church teachings, not the musings of fickle and fallible minds. "In the *Pensées* there is running tension between the force of skeptical points and the certitude of religious belief."¹⁵ Belief and doubt are always, and perhaps inevitably, intimate companions.

It is worth speculating why skepticism takes different contours within different religious milieux and even between different disciplines within a single religious milieu. It has become a truism to say that theology did not have the same importance in Islam as it did in Christian Europe. Law stands at the heart of Islam, so it is said, while theology exists on its margins. Thus, any skepticism in Islam needs to be found within the realm of law. This line of thinking is highly tendentious. Theological reflection in Islam includes philosophical and mystical elements, making it broader than is often thought.¹⁶ Also, while law has a more immediate relevancy to society (in all contexts and not only in Islam), scholars who took up difficult questions of law were as much part of the learned elite as those who considered difficult questions of faith. In other words, scholarly thought was never bifurcated into the theological and the legal. Moreover, discussion of abstruse points of both law and theology was largely limited to exclusive scholarly circles; uncertainties of any kind were not to be divulged to the masses. Finally, Islam's scholars did make methodological distinctions. They may not have divided law and theology into wholly disconnected disciplines, as we might today, but they did realize that they were not the same. The fact that one was not certain about the direction of Mecca did not necessarily invalidate one's prayer as prescribed by ritual law. In this regard, greater weight was given to intention. One could satisfactorily perform one's prayers on the basis of a supposition (*zann*), but this did not apply to beliefs. One could not believe on the basis of a supposition about the nature of God and his relation to the world. Had one confused the creator with his creation, leading to faulty worship of something other than God? Supposition (*zann*) was a much more serious matter in the theological arena than in the legal. Indeed, conjecturing about the nature of God and his relation to his creation could do greater harm to one's soul than uncertainty about the direction of Mecca at the time of prayer.

This study is not about questions of certainty and uncertainty in law.¹⁷ The focus here is on theological perplexities. We have no evidence to say that skeptical reservations in theology carried less significance for Islam's scholars than those in law. Perplexities about core doctrines arguably posed a greater threat to the very purpose of Islam than doubt that one was correctly performing shari'a-prescribed duties. Indeed, all scholars who feature in this study and who are considered some of the greatest in the history of Islam were passionately driven to reconsider theological ambiguities because of the danger they posed to the clarity of Islam's message. Indeed, some of the fiercest debates in Islam, both then and now, involve the nature of the divine attributes (that is,

descriptors of God: merciful, just, powerful, knowing, hearing, seeing, speaking, sublime, majestic, and so on). Are these attributes of God as real as God or just metaphors? If they are only metaphors, how can we say that they offer us real knowledge about God—and if they do not offer such knowledge, how can a believer say he knows what he is called to worship at various points in the day? Indeed, the fact that the world does not concur on a single religious truth remains a source of puzzlement and also a potential challenge to the credibility of all truth claims. If one is not clearly true, perhaps none are.

As noted earlier, not all skepticism is the same. Some enigmas are unique to Islam. For example, the Qur'an says that God created the world and then mounted his throne. This would seem to suggest that God is located in a particular place, namely, on his throne, whereas rational argumentation would object to the idea that God is spatially bound. Where is God? Can two contradictory answers to a single question coexist? It is also held in Islam that the Qur'an is God's speech. Does this mean that it is eternal as God is eternal, and if so, how is one to account for the existence of two eternal entities within a strictly monotheistic framework?

Other enigmas in Islam are shared across traditions but still take unique shape in Islam. One such enigma involves the possibility of knowing the causal order of the world and thus its true reality.¹⁸ The question involves the nature of things. Do things possess a nature that causes them to do what they do? It is, for example, in the nature of a horse to run swiftly, in the nature of fire to burn, and so on. However, this suggests that things operate according to their own causal nature—and thus independently of God's power. If God is all-powerful, as the Qur'an insists, how could there be a causal order that is not subject to his inscrutable will? Today, God makes horses run swiftly, but tomorrow he might make them fly. Today, fire burns, but tomorrow it might cool. At stake is the governance of the world. Is God governor of all things or do they operate according to a system of efficient causality that he might have set up but that now makes his input negligible for the workings of the world?

Some forms of skepticism show up in other traditions but not in Islam. For example, there is no genre of literature in Islam comparable to that in Judaism wherein God is put on trial for failing to keep his promise to protect his people.¹⁹ There may be historical reasons for this. Muslims have not been the victims of sustained collective persecution as Jews have been. However, the origins of Jewish literature indicting God for his failings predate this kind of persecution, beginning as early as the Book of Job. The difference may therefore be theological no less than historical. The Bible assumes that God will redeem his people in this world; the Qur'an does not make this world the place where divine promises are fulfilled. Disasters might happen here and now, but if you remain devoted to God, you can anticipate victory in paradise.²⁰ The fact that bad things happen cannot be taken as evidence of a theological problem. It is in the next world that divine promises are fulfilled.

A theological reason may also explain why the dichotomy between human nature and divine grace, so prominent in Christianity, was not a topic of

controversy in Islam. Even if Muslims recognize sin as an indelible characteristic of the human condition, there is no doctrine of original sin in Islam as in Christianity. As a result, Islam's scholars did not consider the possibility that human nature is entirely depraved and that salvation is therefore wholly dependent on God's grace. If humans are completely depraved by nature (which, of course, is not the viewpoint of all Christian thinkers nor of biblical texts), they can do nothing to determine the state of their soul. God either has or has not predestined them for salvation. But this suggests that salvation proceeds by divine whim without human input. The enigma, seen in the exchanges over freewill between Erasmus and Luther and more implicitly in Montaigne,²¹ did not appear in Islam—at least not in the same way. Islam's scholars certainly did debate God's power to determine one's otherworldly destiny and even his freedom, contrary to expectations, to reward sinners and punish the righteous, but as a result of Islam's affirmation of the fundamental soundness of human nature at least in its pristine condition, debates about predestination did not revolve around questions of God's arbitrary election of some for salvation and others for destruction. In Islam, the matter did not depend on whether or not humans were wholly depraved but on God's absolute freedom.

The study of skepticism remains a work in progress. Here, we hope to contribute to a more global understanding of the phenomenon by considering a handful of case studies from different centuries during Islam's classical period. This is meant to underscore the variety of skepticism even within the single tradition of Islam. But there is also continuity. Across the period of our study, scholars were faced with a difficult balancing act. They had to demonstrate the rationality of Islam, first, against obscurantism within Islam's ranks that reduced belief to the literal wordings of revelation apart from reasoned reflection on it and, second, against a philosophizing tendency, also coming from within Islam's ranks, to reduce revelation to little more than a noble lie, a tool to control society. Both tendencies generated doubts about the veracity of Islam's message. The first made belief seem irrational, the second made it seem superfluous, at least for people in the know. Revelation in Islam, it should be noted, is less a question of God's salvation of his people and more about his instruction of those who are willing to listen—that is, knowledge by which to be guided in life. This strong emphasis on revelation as knowledge sets the stage for skeptical controversy. Can Islam deliver the goods, that is, knowledge by which to be guided in life, when philosophy offers a compelling alternative? The challenge, then, was to demonstrate that Islam's message, the Qur'an, was rationally compelling in its literal wordings, provided those wordings were correctly understood. The alternative was to read it allegorically (that is, not according to its apparent meanings but according to hidden ones that only a spiritual elite could know), but this ran the risk of conflating its message with the ever changing musings of the human mind—even that of a highly learned scholar. If scripture was subordinate to the mind, what was the point of having a revealed source of guidance? Why not rely on the mind

alone without recourse to scripture? Some scholars did veer in this direction, but the ones we consider here all sought to counter the ambiguity by arguing for the rationality of revelation. In other words, the scholars who feature in this study were not skeptics in any existential sense but were greatly influenced by skeptical attitudes that led them to think more deeply about the nature of religious truth and ways to determine it with certainty.

Skepticism is often associated with empiricism: the idea that we can make no conclusive (or dogmatic) assertions, no certain claims to truth, without empirical evidence. Without such evidence, we are right to reserve judgment on the dogma in question even if we do not actually reject it. It might be true. It might be false. We lack the empirical evidence to decide. However, skepticism goes beyond the empiricist mindset. This is certainly the case in Islam. Islam's scholars did not so much search for empirical evidence for the truths of Islam. The challenge, rather, was epistemological. What approach to knowledge yields certainty? Thus, in Islam as in other contexts, skepticism was never a simple matter of denying dogmatic assertions but, rather, it was part of a larger conversation about the foundations of knowledge. This is not to paint too broad a definition of skepticism but only to suggest that it has been as much a scholarly strategy within larger debates as its own independent system of thought. This, however, does not mean that skepticism in Islam can be reduced to the techniques of sophistical debate in which one seeks to best one's opponent by exposing contradictions in his or her argument. More profoundly, it serves to question assumptions about the way in which knowledge, in this case religious knowledge, can be established as certain.²²

To draw on a recent study of confusion,²³ it is clear that our doubts are not limited to dogma whether of the philosophical or theological kind that the empiricist might easily challenge. We also become confused about our own sense impressions. (The sun appears small to the naked eye.) As a result, we realize that it is not solely on the basis of our senses that we come to knowledge of the reality of existence. Snow feels cold, but what makes it cold? With age and the proper education, we might begin to think more scientifically and come to understand something of the mechanics of coldness. In other words, we are able to grasp coldness as a concept and not only as a sense impression. However, the state of confusion does not end there. Just as we do not immediately grasp the realities behind our sense impressions, so, too, we can have doubts about concepts in our minds, especially when they contradict one another. For example, some say that individuals turn out the way they do as a result of nature; others attribute it to nurture; still others, rejecting both concepts as overly deterministic, point to rational freewill choices that individuals make over the course of their lives. Which concept—nature, nurture, or rational freewill choice—is true? They are all true in some fashion, but ambiguity remains. We cannot synthesize the different arguments, although each is compelling, and so we acknowledge the limits of what we can know with certainty.

In this sense, our own skeptical reservations about what we know help us see that what we claim to know is never reducible to empirical data but is the fruit of multiple approaches working in tandem. One cannot simply read the literal wordings of the Qur'an and say whether they are true or not. Similarly, one cannot simply rely on philosophy to know the total reality of existence. Thus, to show that the revealed message of Islam had a place within the scope of rationally compelling knowledge, Islam's scholars had to negotiate a number of approaches to knowledge, tempering the claims of any one approach, whether a literal reading of God's message or a philosophical dismissal of it. They thus had to show that the revealed message of Islam was consistent with—if not more compelling than—knowledge obtained by empirical observation and rational argumentation alone. Islam could only survive if it was shown that the revealed message made sense to the mind even if it was not necessarily something that the mind would come up with on its own.²⁴

The point is that skepticism in Islam was intimately tied up with debates over questions of certainty in the arena of religious knowledge. This study, then, is a contribution to religious studies. What can skepticism in Islam tell us about the nature of religion and religious reasoning? Those in the fields of philosophy, history, and sociology may be disappointed with this study. Our goal is not to link elements of skepticism in Islam to philosophy, nor to focus on the historical conditions of the period under consideration (although we do include reference to context), nor to consider the scope and impact of reservations about truth claims in society at large. Our goal, rather, is to consider the way Islam's scholars faced confusion over fundamental religious questions. Skepticism here is a part of the history of religious thought. It is not a prelude to atheism, although it could result in a kind of religious relativism. It was also not a movement, although there was at one point a tendency in that direction. It was, rather, a familiar feature of theological discourse in Islam, where every dogmatic assertion had its counterargument. Doubts, then, were expressed *within*—and not apart from or against—theological reflection. The limited scholarship on skepticism in Islam tends to depict it either in opposition to religion as a whole or as the result of the intrusion of “foreign” ideas into Islam against the will of believers.²⁵ Skepticism could in rare cases lead to the rejection of religion, sometimes described as “freethinking,” but it more commonly featured as an integral part of scholastic debate on the nature of religion.²⁶ It is not only anachronistic to assume that all skepticism is secularizing in nature, but doing so limits our ability to appreciate skepticism in Islam on its own terms. All skepticism is not the same, but it is impossible to ignore the pervasive references to doubt and confusion in the writings of Islam's scholars. They sometimes conjured up skeptical thought as a foil for their own arguments, similar to the above case in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but something else was going on, too. Skepticism was not only imaginary. It was also deployed, even with great vigor, as a way of advancing one set of claims about the nature of religion over against others.

Skepticism in any context is not a self-standing phenomenon. Those who spoke of doubts and confusion in Islam did so over against dogmatic claims that could leave one bewildered: God is on his throne, and yet he is also everywhere; the Qur'an is divine no less than God, and yet it is recited on human tongues and written down on perishable paper; nothing has a nature of its own, God makes things happen as they do, rendering reality inscrutable to human reasoning, and yet if the mind cannot grasp anything about the reality of existence, how can it grasp anything about the reality of God? Within this stormy milieu, other scholars of a different ilk would take up these very conundrums but consider them in different ways: Beyond the physical domain of this world is a metaphysical one to which the soul ascends upon death; the mind can aspire to knowledge of the metaphysical realm through a combination of philosophical instruction and pious activity in this world; and it is the mind's union with God, not bodily resurrection, that constitutes the return to God as revealed by the Qur'an. In other words, a certain kind of religious reasoning might prevail for a period, and while it never disappears, it is subjected to enough doubts to be discarded in favor of a new framework of religious reasoning. It is in this sense that skepticism exists within a ceaselessly shifting discourse about the nature of religion. It played a role, as noted above, in introducing into Christian Europe a humanistic approach to theological questions alongside the scholastic one that had prevailed during the late medieval period. In this sense, looking at skepticism over a number of centuries—our approach in this study—offers insight into the development of religious reasoning in classical Islam.

It is also worth noting that the story of skepticism in Islam includes non-Muslims, especially Christians. It is not so much that Islam's scholars were using skeptical strategies to refute Christianity but rather that Christianity was a useful tool in their skeptical assaults on dogmatic assertions within Islam's scholarly community. Branding one's opponents as Christians was a useful way to discredit them, but this required knowledge of Christianity, including Christian methods of theological reasoning. Knowledge of Christianity was never pursued sympathetically but largely as fodder for constructing a broadside against untenable presentations of religious knowledge within Islam's own scholarly ranks. Still, ironically, reference to Christianity had a role in the formation of religious thinking in Islam even if formulated in negative terms for the sake of polemical debate within Islam.²⁷

This study takes up the theological enigmas that loomed large for Islam in its classical age and examines the way scholars came to terms with such perplexities. Again, Islam's scholars were not mimicking the ancient skeptics even if they used similar terms and concepts. Above all, they did not call themselves skeptics even when they were accommodating skeptical outlooks. As noted earlier, the writings of Cicero and Sextus Empiricus that preserve the heritage of ancient skepticism were not translated into Arabic, but the writings of Plato (429–347 BCE) and John Philoponus (490–570 CE), which Islam's scholars did know, likely offered a model of scholarly inquiry that included

skeptical attitudes and also sophistical techniques of defending both sides of a single argument persuasively. The writings of Aristotle (384–322 BCE) were also known, including works that summarized the positions of skeptics. Islam's scholars were, to be sure, aware of the Greco-Hellenistic past, and the translation of ancient philosophy into Arabic left its mark on the contours of religious reasoning in Islam. Still, it is going too far to say that skepticism in Islam was the byproduct of a philosophical past with some input from Islam's own scholars. As previously mentioned, it is not our goal to trace lines of continuity between skeptical argumentation in the ancient world and in Islam. Conundrums arose out of theological debates within Islam. What could be known with certainty about God and his relation to the world? Scholars had to devise ways to treat these conundrums. Skeptical reservations on one issue or another were viewed not with benign tolerance but as real challenges to the message of Islam as the source of knowledge. To be sure, skepticism in classical Islam is not a story of unbridled and debilitating confusion, but there was confusion, and it was very much integral to developments in the history of religious reasoning in Islam. This is the point.

This study consists of four chapters, each of which examines the way a leading scholar faced the theological perplexities of his day. In brief: A major question in the ninth century involved the location of God (somewhere, everywhere, nowhere?); in the tenth, the uniqueness of Islam (why is it true and other religions false?); in the eleventh and twelfth, God's relation to the world (is he making everything happen or does the world operate according to its own rules of causality?); and in the twelfth and thirteenth, the relation of humanity to divinity (are humans like God in any way?). What could be known for certain about God? Islam was continually defended against doubts, but also the criteria by which it could be said that something about God was certain knowledge were reconsidered.

The existence of a heritage of skepticism in classical Islam is substantiated by the fact that Islam's scholars used precise terminology in reference to skeptical attitudes: terms for confusion, for equally compelling but mutually contradictory arguments, for learned ignorance, for conjecture as opposed to knowledge, in addition to terms for doubt, ambiguity, and so on. Scholars were aware that theological debate easily devolved into divergent opinions that could not be easily reconciled, necessitating terms to describe such scholarly stasis. Again, such language existed within the wider scholastic milieu. Thus, reflection on skepticism in Islam on its own terms will help us think in more nuanced fashion about Islam's scholastic heritage, not as a simple clash of faith and reason struggling to bring about a secular breakthrough that never happened but rather as a tradition of disputation that invariably included—and even depended upon—skeptical reservations. It is in this sense that skepticism is arguably a constitutive element of religious reasoning in Islam.

Therein lies the broader importance of this study: the integrity of skepticism for religious reasoning. The hope is that this insight will stimulate deeper

conversation about the nature of religion, especially at a time when religion is commonly associated with a fundamentalist impulse by believers no less than unbelievers. Evidence from classical Islam suggests that skepticism has a central place within religious reasoning. This study thus seeks not merely to introduce Islam to those interested in the study of skepticism but without expertise in the field of Islam, but it also raises vital questions about the nature of religion, not only then but now. This study demonstrates how doubt serves the advance of religious reasoning, and goes further, showing how questioning what we know and can know is actually integral to the venture of religious reasoning itself.

The first chapter focuses on a ninth-century scholar and *littérateur* by the name of Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr al-Jāhiz (d. 869). We follow his attempts to stem the tide of anthropomorphist belief, which in his view spawned endless confusion among Muslims about the nature of God. Indeed, it is at this time that confusion (*ḥayra*) takes on precise import within scholastic circles, indicating a state wherein one finds oneself compelled to accept contradictory viewpoints about God. (It approximates the notion of *aporia* in ancient skepticism.) The big question was the location of God. The Qur’an says that he is seated on his throne. This would suggest he is in a particular place, implying that God is spatially limited. But is God not everywhere? The Qur’an also says that God has hands, eyes, and a face. Does this mean that God has a body like humans have a body? Jahiz went to great lengths to show that the Qur’an was clear in its message, not confusing, and also that it did not advocate a humanlike image of God. Nevertheless, other scholars, then as now, refused to subordinate scripture to the abstract concepts of rational interpretation, preferring its anthropomorphic imagery while at the same time presuming theological respectability. In the eyes of Jahiz, this was the height of confusion, to hold a position bound to generate contradiction, namely, that God has a body.

Who were the sowers of doubt here? The confusion, at least according to Jahiz, was due in part to Christians, who at the time were generally more theologically astute than Muslims. This made them adept at pointing out contradictions in the beliefs of Islam, leaving Muslims confused about their own claims to knowledge of God. There seems to be some truth to the charge if one is to believe the proceedings of a Christian–Muslim debate from this period. To respond to the challenge, Jahiz sought to provide his fellow Muslims with arguments to use against Christians. He had to speak of Islam as a rational system. It was not simply a matter of hearing the literal wordings of its message as recited scripture. These wordings also had to make sense to the mind. Jahiz had great confidence in the human capacity to know the ways of God and communicate them clearly in Arabic, the language of the Qur’an. This required him to show that the anthropomorphist language of the Qur’an was not to be taken literally. But this was met with the skepticism of other scholars, like Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), who were not convinced that the speech of God, that is, the Qur’an, could mean anything other

than what it said in its literal wordings. Indeed, God was seated on his throne, and he did have hands, eyes, and a face, even if these truths did not square with scholastic reasoning about the nature of God. All that could be said about God was what had already been said in scripture, contradictions notwithstanding. Right from the start, skepticism in Islam involved a battle over the import of language. To what extent are the apparent wordings of scripture able to represent the reality of God?

Skepticism, here, was not just a manner of pursuing knowledge, whereby one temporarily suspends judgment about a difficult matter but still expects to figure it out with further research. Jahiz would certainly have accepted this kind of skepticism where doubt is not the end but a vital part of scholarly inquiry—a necessary but preliminary stage on the way to final certainty. Indeed, he would tirelessly apply his genius to the task of turning confusion into clarity. But it was a losing battle. There was another kind of skepticism, one that resisted the idea that scholars, even the brilliant Jahiz, could say anything more about God than what God had said about himself in scripture, however confusing it might appear to the human mind. This required one to accept contradictions about God. He has a body, and yet he is everywhere. His speech is he, but it is also not he. Skepticism here implies scholarly impotence where one is confused without expecting further inquiry to bring certainty about God. Jahiz saw such confusion as a threat not only to the beliefs of Islam but also to the moral and political order of the Abode of Islam.

The second chapter takes up the case of a little-known philosopher of the tenth century by the name of Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī (d. 992). He sought to demonstrate that Islam was the one true religion by means of philosophical logic. The challenge he faced was not anthropomorphist belief. That continued to feature in theological debate, but the big question had become the uniqueness of Islam. The Abode of Islam was highly cosmopolitan, including Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, who mingled with Muslims. They all seemed to be reasonable people. They were all able to advance compelling arguments in defense of their beliefs. On what grounds could it be said that Islam was the true religion and the others false? It was no longer enough simply to make clear and rationally compelling statements about God in the language of scripture, as Jahiz had sought to do. By the tenth century, it was clear that scholars of one religion, if sufficiently skilled in the techniques of debate, could make their beliefs seem compelling, but so could the scholars of other religions. Islam's scholars were thus faced with what was known as "the equivalence of evidence" (*takāfu' al-adilla*), that is, the admission that rational arguments for different religions were equally compelling. (It approximates the notion of *isostheneia* in ancient skepticism.) Given their divergent beliefs, all religions could not be true, and yet they could all seem equally compelling.

The idea of the equivalence of evidence almost became a school of thought in its own right. We see passing references to scholars who adhered to the

equivalence of evidence as a creed of sorts. However, other scholars claimed that there was a way to judge between the various competing claims to religious truth. They looked to the logic of philosophy as a neutral criterion by which to ascertain truth apart from confessional biases. This meant that one had to go beyond words to concepts. Words alone were not capable of expressing truth, neither the words of scripture nor the words of theological debate. Indeed, confusion here was no longer simply a matter of finding oneself faced with equally compelling but mutually contradictory arguments. It was now the sad predicament of all those who did not know how to use philosophical reasoning to access the realities of the metaphysical realm.

A variety of philosophically minded scholars tried their hand at applying philosophical reasoning to the theological cacophony of the day. 'Amiri's attempt was one of the more interesting. Shocked by the implications of the equivalence of evidence (especially the way learned Muslims used it as a pretext to shirk their religious duties), he set out to demonstrate by philosophical reasoning that Islam was not simply one of many religious possibilities. It was logically necessary and so its teachings were obligatory for the learned elite as well as the ignorant masses. Islam was not simply a socially useful myth: it was philosophically true.

'Amiri may have thought he had found a way out of the conundrum of the equivalence of evidence. However, by turning to the logic of Aristotle to defend the claims to Islam of uniqueness, he was essentially saying that religion could not be validated on its own terms but only by philosophical criteria. By showing that the claims of Islam could be verified by the highest standards of logic, 'Amiri contributed to the enthronement of philosophy as queen of the sciences in Islam. Were philosophers or prophets to head Islam's court? 'Amiri's logic-based defense of Islam against the equivalence of evidence only reinforced the suspicion that the message of Islam on its own was unable to present a convincing argument for the reality of God.

The third chapter examines the thought of the leading scholar of the eleventh century and one of the better known figures in Islam, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). He is most famous for the skeptical crisis he underwent at the height of his teaching career. By his day, Islam had weathered the challenges of anthropomorphism and the idea of the equivalence of evidence. The problem now was the claim of the philosophers to know the truth of God better than the prophets. Certain knowledge about God came not from scriptural rhetoric but the demonstrative proofs of philosophy. This claim, represented by the likes of Avicenna (d. 1037), was the very opposite of skepticism. Here, one could reach certain knowledge about God—from philosophy, not from prophetic revelation. This, of course, made the message of Islam superfluous for inquiry into the truths of God. Ghazali, although philosophically minded, recognized the threat to Islam and the corresponding need to promote a kind of skepticism in order to humble the philosophers. Ghazali's system of thought is complex. One aspect of it is his use of a kind of skepticism that can be called learned ignorance.²⁸ (He did not use this exact phrase but

did have specific language for the concept.) The goal of this kind of skepticism was not to bolster the faith by casting suspicion on the power of human reasoning but rather to question whether the dogmatic assertions of philosophers about God were themselves convincing. In this sense, Ghazali constructed philosophical proofs to show that philosophy alone could not adequately represent the truths of God. In the end, there was no way to reason to God in his infinite reality. The learned should admit their ignorance in this respect—and thus the limits of scholastic reasoning when it comes to knowledge of God. Another approach to knowledge of God was thus needed, one that did not dismiss scholastic reasoning but went beyond it to mystical seeing.

Ghazali thus called Muslims with philosophical expertise to admit that there were limits to their claims and that there was a corresponding need to submit to prophetic instruction for knowledge of God. He was by no means suggesting they should turn off their minds in order to believe. The post-modern concept of a leap of faith would have never occurred to him. Rather, he was saying that philosophy alone was no guarantee of certain knowledge of God. Revelation, too, was needed. This, however, would involve him in a contradiction of his own making. The problem concerned the workings of the world. The theological school to which Ghazali belonged held that God was the sole cause behind all things. He was, after all, the creator of all things. Thus, while philosophical reflection might lead us to think that things have natures causing them to do what they do, in reality God directly makes things do what they do from one moment to the next. This undercuts the idea of causal order. God might make fire burn one moment and cool the next. As a result, we cannot say we know the working of the world according to a causal order but only as they appear to be.

Ghazali, however, was also aware that he had committed himself to the opposite view as a result of his reliance on philosophy, even if he used it to challenge the pretension of the philosophers to possess surer knowledge of God than the prophets. The fact was that Ghazali had taken philosophical reasoning as criterion of knowledge, even of the knowledge of our own ignorance about the infinite reality of God. But to take philosophy as criterion of knowledge meant that Ghazali also had to commit to its assumption of a causal order to the world. With no causal order, it would be impossible to know anything about the world, making it dubious that the mind could rationally comprehend anything about God; this made the mind wholly unreliable, requiring one to admit total ignorance of God. Ghazali thus had to find a way to resolve his dilemma wherein he accepted both God as sole cause of all things and a causal order to the world that the mind could grasp through philosophical reasoning. Ghazali made a valiant effort to resolve the contradiction by positing a synthesis between human reasoning and divine speaking, a formula that can be called philosophical prophecy and that stands at the heart of his thought. In this way, he helped to usher a sea change into Islam's theological discourse, making it more attuned to the demands of philosophical reasoning for centuries to come.

Finally, the fourth chapter takes up a highly controversial figure, Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), who wrote voluminously against philosophy in the wake of the fall of Baghdad in 1258. His thinking, while noticeable in his own day, did not succeed in reversing the philosophizing direction in Islam that Ghazali's writings had greatly helped to consolidate in Islam's scholarly circles. In contrast, in recent years, Muslims involved in movements known under the rubric of Salafism have enthusiastically embraced Ibn Taymiyya's ideas. In his own day, he mounted a dogged challenge to the synthesis of philosophy and theology that had been forged over the course of the previous centuries. In the wake of the Mongol onslaughts, he concluded that God had withdrawn his favor from Islam as a fitting punishment for the submission of its scholars to the logic of the Greeks. As a result, Muslims no longer worshipped God, knowledge of whom had been communicated by Muhammad, but a god of their own making, conjured up by syllogistic reasoning.

Ibn Taymiyya's attack on syllogistic reasoning diverges from Ghazali's call to learned ignorance. Ibn Taymiyya, while a highly erudite scholar, was effectively calling for a rejection of philosophical reasoning in favor of the logic of revelation, whereas Ghazali remained a partisan of philosophical reasoning. However, Ibn Taymiyya's critique of the power of logic to produce knowledge of God is not at all simplistic. Indeed, he effectively demonstrates the absurdity of philosophical ideas that by his day had become widely accepted as truth. He is thus a skeptic of a sort, doubting the power of logic as practiced by philosophers. However, a rationality of sorts marks his own thinking even while he adheres to the literal wordings of scripture, making it difficult to reduce his thought to the status of nominalism. He had no doubts about the truth of Islam, but he makes unparalleled usage of skeptical tactics to undermine the prevailing system of beliefs and practices, which in his view amounted to a kind of polytheism even if it masqueraded as Islam. His doubts led him to question forms of religious reasoning that in his view risked the truth of Islam.

Ibn Taymiyya's skepticism is one that seeks to liberate true religion from the machinations of scholastic theology. For inspiration, he turned to the Qur'an, which strongly criticizes people who follow their own speculative conjecture (*ẓann*) in theological matters. As a result, they worship creatures rather than the creator. Ibn Taymiyya redirects the Qur'an's skeptical critique of the people of its day against Muslims of his day, especially learned scholars. In his view, they had rationalized a system of saint worship that had grown into a richly elaborate hierarchy of spiritual masters. His fellow believers may have been Muslim in name, but in his view they had become quasi-polytheist as a result of following their own conjecture rather than the knowledge of God as revealed to Muhammad in scripture. For this reason, they merited the criticism that the Qur'an had directed against past peoples.

Ibn Taymiyya, of course, could not accuse his fellow Muslims of outright polytheism as the Qur'an does against portions of its audience. Instead, he implicates Christians in his battle against false forms of religious reasoning in

Islam, accusing them of being the source of the theological rationalizing that now inflicted Islam's scholars, leading them to accept a faux monotheism. Across several works, Ibn Taymiyya advances a twofold argument. He first identifies Christians as the object of the Qur'an's critique. They are guilty of the conjecturing that, according to the Qur'an, results in associating creatures with God, ending by making a divine being of Jesus. He says next that Muslims have become like Christians in the way they make quasi-deities of their saints. Islam's scholars are thus guilty by association with Christianity. They, too, in Christian-like fashion, follow conjecture rather than knowledge. As a result, they rationalize quasi-polytheistic beliefs. Whether the polytheist beliefs condemned by the Qur'an or the deviant beliefs of Christians and Muslims in his own day, such beliefs, Ibn Taymiyya loudly protests, are based on philosophical reasoning and thus amount to conjecture, not knowledge. The drive to define Islam thus requires recourse to Christianity. Beliefs deemed untenable—whether anthropomorphist beliefs in the case of Jahiz or philosophical ones in the case of Ibn Taymiyya—are discredited by being identified with the theological waywardness of Christianity. Islam is never defined apart from Christianity!

By organizing our study into four chapters, each of which focuses on a particular moment in the classical period, we are not suggesting that a conundrum prominent in one age did not persist into later ones. Our goal is to illustrate the diverse contours of a skeptical heritage in Islam within its scholastic milieu by considering a handful of case studies. Further research will doubtlessly refine our understanding of the way in which skeptical argumentation and the responses to it worked to *develop* religious reasoning in Islam. Also, as a way to tie together our study, we open each chapter with some reflection on the spirit of Baghdad during the time in question. Not all the scholars who feature in our study had a direct or sustained connection to the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate. Such reflection is meant more to offer historical perspective to those who are not specialists in the study of Islam but are interested in the phenomenon of skepticism. Still, there is reason to connect our study to Baghdad. The story of skepticism in classical Islam is also the story of the vicissitudes of the city that for so long stood as the political center of the Abode of Islam. It is also worth noting that we have tried to make our study accessible to scholars who are not specialists in the field of Islam, mainly by explaining in detail what is obvious only to specialists and by avoiding technical terminology. This study does not undertake a comparison of Islam's varied forms of skepticism with counterparts from other contexts and religious traditions.²⁹ Such is a great desideratum. The study of skepticism in one context sheds light on its study in another. However, since the heritage of skepticism in Islam is virtually unexplored terrain, it is important as a first step to survey it on its own terms. Only then can comparative inquiry be fruitfully undertaken.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that theological reflection in classical Islam was for the most part not a rearguard defense against any creeping empiricist or rationalist denial of faith. It is more accurate to speak of it as a ceaseless

cycle of scholastic assertion and skeptical reservation. (Indeed, such a dynamic continues in many of Islam's scholarly circles today.) One can admire the vigor with which Islam's scholars increasingly sought to articulate the revealed message of Islam as rationally compelling. This process could not have taken place without skeptical questioning. Have we lost sight today of the idea that skeptical inquiry is as vital to religious reasoning as it is to scientific reasoning? Our study suggests that skepticism, even if it can result in scholarly gridlock, applies to the realm of religion as much as to that of science. This is not to equate the religious with the scientific venture. They start from different points of departure and use different methodologies, but both engage the mind in its quest for knowledge beyond itself. There is always more knowledge, more insight, and more perspective to be had. Religious reasoning is no less static than scientific inquiry; and doubt, perplexity, and hesitation are no less intrinsic to the pursuit of the former than the latter.

This might have been more obvious in classical Islam when religion was seen as a body of knowledge rather than a personal choice as it is often understood today. This may have made it entirely normal for scholars to pursue religious knowledge as a science, hence with the same skeptical attitude they brought to the disciplines that they inherited from the Greeks (medicine, logic, astronomy and geography), which they appreciated but also viewed as epistemologically limited.³⁰ Galen, the great scholar of medicine, might have been the first source to consult when it came to the organs of the body. Ptolemy, the great astronomer and geographer, might have been the one to read for knowledge of the length of the Mediterranean. Aristotle, held in the highest regard as a philosopher, left a huge impact on the civilization of Islam in terms of the science of logic. Nevertheless, Muslims did not accept the teachings of the Greeks without question. They corrected what Galen said about anatomy. They corrected Ptolemy's measurement of the length of the Mediterranean. And they raised important questions about the credibility of Aristotle's system of logic. It was not only greater appreciation of inductive approaches to knowledge that led Islam's scholars to reservations about the Greco-Hellenistic legacy. It was also a readiness to question the so-called authorities, that is, to cast doubts on what the scientific authorities asserted no less than the religious ones.³¹ This is not to speak of revolutions in religious or scientific reasoning but rather a persistent questioning whereby claims to knowledge were invariably met with skeptical interrogation.

It is not our purpose to draw comparisons between religion and science but only to conclude by saying that skepticism is a vital, indeed integral, part of the venture of religion. This might sound odd in a secularizing age when religious piety tends to be identified with fundamentalism, sometimes by believers as well as non-believers. The idea is that to be a believer one has to stop thinking and simply accept the teachings of the faith. A kind of fundamentalism is also at times imputed to the secular mindset. In some respects, religionist and secularist fundamentalism, real or imagined, are two sides of the same coin. They are both based on the assumption that religion is wholly

a matter of God's grace rather than human reasoning. Either you have it or you do not. Either you accept religion and reject secularism or you reject religion and accept secularism. Such a dichotomy is a recent phenomenon that would have struck the overwhelming majority of scholars in classical Islam as abnormal. For them, faith was nothing if not based on reasoning, making it a consequence of human reflection no less than divine revelation.

Our study not only introduces Islam more fully into the history of scepticism, but it is also a statement about religion. It is not simply that skepticism is not foreign to religious reasoning. Skepticism is itself a religious phenomenon. Beliefs and doubts invariably work in tandem. Doubts along with beliefs have played a vital role in making Islam what it is today. Doubts, it can be said, enjoy a recognized standing within the circle of religion. They serve not simply as background against which to contrast beliefs. Beliefs themselves, in order to be beliefs, require doubts. A believer is invariably caught up with the possibility that his beliefs are not the only answer, and this leads him again and again to reconsider his beliefs within new vistas of meaning. Skepticism is a double-edged sword, but belief would not be belief without it.

All of this offers food for thought amidst our own current cultural wars, which are in part predicated upon the assumption that one simply believes what one believes apart from reasoning of any kind. Whether our beliefs are religious or secularist in kind (or a combination of the two), it needs to be asked whether we have the confidence of the scholars of classical Islam, who recognized that the only way to hold beliefs was to test them against skeptical inquiry. In our age, beliefs are tolerated as a marker of personal identity, whereas in Islam's golden age, they were tantamount to knowledge, but it was because they had the stature of knowledge that scholars subjected them to scholarly investigation, skeptical reservations included, to the same extent as any other kind of knowledge. This is not to say that the formulas of belief in classical Islam were more compelling than those that inspire people today, whatever one's affiliation, but the expectation that those beliefs would be subjected to skeptical reservations may have made them more comprehensible to those who did not wholly share them. In that lies a lesson for us in today's pluralistic moment.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi, *al-'Iqd al-Farīd (The Unique Necklace)*, ed. Aḥmad Amīn, Aḥmad al-Zayn, and Aḥmad al-Abyārī, 8 vols. (Lajnat al-Ta'līf wa-l-Tarjama: Cairo 1940), vol. 2, p. 217.
- 2 See, for example, Ulrich Rudolph, "Reflections on al-Fārābī's *Mabādī' ārā' ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila*," in Peter Adamson, ed., *In the Age of al-Fārābī: Arabic Philosophy in the Fourth/Tenth Century* (London-Turin: The Warburg Institute-Nino Aragno Editore 2008), pp. 1–14.
- 3 Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002).
- 4 Christopher Lane, *The Age of Doubt: Tracing the Roots of our Religious Uncertainty* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2011).

- 5 Peter J. Casarella, (ed.), *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press 2006); Lodi Nauta, "Lorenzo Valla and Quattrocento Scepticism," *Vivarium* 44 (2006), pp. 375–95; Amos Edelheit, "The 'Scholastic' Theology of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Between Biblical Faith and Academic Skepticism," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 74 (2007), pp. 523–70.
- 6 See, for example, Richard M. Frank, "Knowledge and *Taqīd*: The Foundations of Religious Belief in Classical Ash'arism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109 (1989), pp. 37–62.
- 7 See, for example, the discussion over the possibility of being a believer without being capable of defending one's beliefs through rational argumentation (*istidlāl*) in Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Fiṣal fī l-Milal wa-l-Ahwā' wa-l-Niḥal*, ed. Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn, 3 vols. (Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya: Beirut 1996), vol. 2, pp. 327ff. See also the opening remarks on *taqīd* (that is, accepting one's beliefs on the authority of authors) in al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, ed. Fathalla Kholeif (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq 1970).
- 8 For overview of the debate and one viewpoint, see Alexander Key, "The Applicability of the Term 'Humanism' to Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī," *Studia Islamica* [100/101] (2005), pp. 71–112.
- 9 See Richard Bett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Skepticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2010); and John Greco (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008).
- 10 Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003). See also Richard H. Popkin and Arjo Vanderjagt (eds.), *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill 1993); Gianni Paganini (ed.), *The Return of Scepticism: From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle* (Dordrecht: Kluwer 2003); and Gianni Paganini and José R. Maia Neto (eds.), *Renaissance Scepticisms* (Dordrecht: Springer 2009).
- 11 One sees this trend in the writings of Nicholas of Cusa, Lorenzo Valla, and Pico della Mirandola, among others. See note 5 above.
- 12 Sabina Flanagan, *Doubt in an Age of Faith: Uncertainty in the Long Twelfth Century* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers 2008). See also Susan Reynolds, "Social Mentalities and the Case of Medieval Scepticism," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, vol. 1 (1991), pp. 21–41.
- 13 Henrik Lagerlund (ed.), *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background* (Leiden: Brill 2010).
- 14 Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729*. Volume I: *The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990). For a similar development in nineteenth-century America, see James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1985).
- 15 Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, p. 181.
- 16 See, for example, Ayman Shihadeh (ed.), *Sufism and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2008).
- 17 On that topic, see, for example, Baber Johansen, "Dissent and Uncertainty in the Process of Legal Norm Construction in Muslim Sunnī Law," in Michael Cook, Najam Haider, Intisar Rabb et al., eds., *Law and Tradition in Classical Islamic Thought: Studies in Honor of Professor Hossein Modarressi* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013), pp. 127–44.
- 18 Jonathan Barnes, "Ancient Skepticism and Causation," in Myles Burnyeat, ed., *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley: The University of California Press 1983), pp. 149–203.
- 19 Mordecai Roshwald, "Authority, Skepticism and Dissent in Judaism," *Jewish Social Studies* 40 (1978), pp. 189–230; and Dov Weiss, "Confrontations with God

- in Late Rabbinic Literature,” Ph.D. diss. (Chicago: University of Chicago 2011). One possible parallel to this kind of skepticism in Islam is Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (d. 1058). See Henri Laoust, “La vie et philosophie d’ Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī,” *Bulletin d’Études Orientales* 10 (1944), pp. 119–57.
- 20 Angelika Neuwirth, “Two Views of History and Human Future: Qur’anic and Biblical Renderings of Divine Promises,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 8 (2008), pp. 1–20.
 - 21 Terence Penelhum, “Skepticism and Fideism,” in *The Skeptical Tradition*, pp. 287–318.
 - 22 For a nice illustration of this, see Christophe Grellard, “Nicholas of Autrecourt’s Skepticism: The Ambivalence of Medieval Epistemology,” in *Rethinking the History of Skepticism*, pp. 119–43.
 - 23 Joseph L. Camp, Jr., *Confusion: A Study in the Theory of Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2002).
 - 24 However, as has been noted in the case of modern Europe, the attempt to demonstrate the rationality of religion, even for pious purposes, can have the unintended consequence of making reason the litmus test of all claims to religious truth. See Michael J. Buckley, SJ, *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Process of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2004).
 - 25 See, respectively, Joel L. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age* (Leiden: Brill 1992), *passim*; and Josef van Ess, “Skepticism in Islamic Religious Thought,” *al-Abḥāth* 21 (1968), pp. 1–18. The idea of a non-Islamic origin for skepticism in Islam features in Ibn Taymiyya, *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians*, trans. Wael B. Hallaq (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993), pp. xxxix–l. See also C. Baffioni, “Per L’ipotesi di un influo della scepsi sulla filosofia islamica,” in G. Gianantoni, ed., *Lo scetticismo antico*, 2 vols. (Naples: Bibliopolis 1981), vol. 1, pp. 415–534. It is also worth noting a study of related interest, Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islam* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen 2011).
 - 26 Atheism in Islam was not so much a rejection of the existence of God but rather of prophecy as a source of knowledge about God and guidance for life. See Sarah Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden: Brill 1999); and Dominique Urvoy, *Les penseurs libres dans l’Islam classique: l’interrogation sur la religion dans les penseurs arabes indépendants* (Paris: A. Michel 1996).
 - 27 David Thomas, “The Open and the Closed in Early Muslim Society,” in Antti Laato and Pekka Lindqvist, eds., *Encounters of the Children of Abraham from Ancient to Modern Times* (Leiden: Brill 2010), pp. 183–97.
 - 28 There are parallels to Ghazali’s brand of skepticism in Christian Europe in the late medieval and early modern periods. See, for example, Jasper Hopkins, (trans.), *Nicholas Cusa on Learned Ignorance: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning 1985); Martin Pickavé, “Henry of Ghent and John Duns Scotus on Skepticism and the Possibility of Naturally Acquired Knowledge,” in *Rethinking the History of Skepticism*, pp. 61–96; and Theo Verbeek, “From ‘Learned Ignorance’ to Scepticism: Descartes and Calvinist Orthodoxy,” in *Scepticism and Irreligion*, pp. 31–45.
 - 29 There have been scattered and limited attempts to do so. For one example, see H. A. Wolfson, “Nicholas of Autrecourt and Ghazali’s Argument against Causality,” *Speculum* 44 (1969), pp. 234–38.
 - 30 See, for example, Shahid Rahman, Tony Street and Hassan Tahiri, (eds.), *The Unity of Science in the Arabic Tradition: Science, Logic, Epistemology and their Interactions* (Dordrecht: Springer 2008).
 - 31 It is well known that Islam’s scholars raised doubts about some of the findings of Galen, Ptolemy, etc. That is another side to the story of skepticism in Islam. For the history of science in Islam, see Ahmad Dallal, *Islam, Science, and the Challenge of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2010).

1 Words, words, words

Christians are the source of every confusion and ambiguity.

Jahiz (d. 869)

Baghdad in its beginnings

Baghdad was founded in 762 by the caliph al-Manṣūr as the capital city of the Abbasid dynasty (750–1268). It soon became the heart of a civilization pulsing with debate and disputation on every topic imaginable. During the course of the ninth century, the focus of this chapter, a chorus of voices could be heard in Baghdad all seeking to make sense of life's questions. People gathered in mosques not only to perform prescribed prayers, in homes not only to host friends old and new, and in shops in the marketplace not only to conduct daily business, but also to discuss and defend divergent views on a myriad of issues. It was inevitable that the varied sounds of all these voices would produce more of a cacophony than a harmony.

The city was the place for you if you wanted to discuss the merits of one people as opposed to another: Were Arabs better or Persians? Greeks or Indians? Turks or Chinese? Baghdad was an exciting city for you if you relished the fine points of politics: Did the ruler have to be a direct descendant of Muhammad or was it enough for him to hail from the wider clan of the Prophet? Was it even necessary for the ruler to be Arab? Perhaps it was better to have a strongman with no holy lineage who could assure peace and order, and rule with justice in the name of Islam. Perhaps, as yet another area of debate and discussion, you were attracted to questions of etiquette and entertainment: Was it better to be a generous host, sparing no expense to provide your guest with the finest foods and gormandizing delights, or should you serve him simple fare—broth with vegetables, for example? The first option offered you the opportunity to display your character, the second a way to test his.

Baghdad was called 'Madīnat al-Salām,' the City of Peace. There you could find friendly companions who would happily spend their evenings in your company discussing the characteristics of every trade and manner of

employment: Was it better for a judge to deal harshly with the faithful who transgressed the law? Or should he treat them with the mercy that all believers hoped to receive on Judgment Day? Could a merchant who sold his goods at a reasonable profit and nothing more expect to succeed? Or was it necessary to be a bit cunning, even deceptive, when hawking his wares, lest he fall behind the momentum of the marketplace? And how was one to tell a holy mendicant from a trickster since both frequented the city's byways, populated the crossroads and beseeched alms from the passersby?

Theological controversy

No topic was more hotly contested than religion. Major points of dispute included the existence of human freewill over against the unlimited sovereignty of God the All-Powerful and All-Knowing. Many a scholar insisted that only God creates. There can be no creator other than God. But this was to strip humans of agency of their own. While not quite automatons according to this view, they have no innate power to act on their own. The possession of innate power implies the ability to bring things into being without God. The underlying question, of course, was the meaning of being human. If power were innate to the human condition, humans would be able to create themselves, determining their destiny without God's input. Did humans have such willpower? If they did, this confused God's status as the singular creator. It also put limits on the scope of his knowledge. If humans had power of their own, God would not know in advance what they would or would not do at future moments. After all, if humans were free, with their own innate capacity to act according to choices that had not been determined in advance, they would possess a power that was not under God's purview. God could only guess what they might do next, implying that God was ignorant of future events and outcomes.¹

For many a scholar, there was a fundamental contradiction between human freewill and the omniscience and omnipotence of God. It could only be one or the other, not both, so it was best to go with God's unlimited sovereignty. Scholars did make extraordinary efforts to resolve the conundrum. Humans, they posited, had to have some choice in what they did or did not do. It would be rather unjust of God to hold people accountable for their actions on Judgment Day without giving them a say in the very actions for which they would be judged. God might be the one who determines what is right and wrong, good and bad (although there were those who claimed the human mind could know such things without revealed instruction from God), but it would be odd—not to say unjust—if he also made people do right and wrong, good and bad, as if they were puppets in his hands. By way of a solution, some argued that humans, while not having innate power to create their own acts, did play a role in choosing them. In this way, they accrued merits or demerits for their acts. This was not to give humans a power of their own apart from what God gave them but only to award them the choice to obey or

disobey God's commands and prohibitions, that is, shari'a. Still, how did they acquire the power to do what they chose to do and not do? All power is God's. Thus, in this view, it was necessary to say that God imputes power to humans, even if they do not possess it innately as their own. God creates the power by which humans do what they choose to do. They have no capacity to act on their own. That would infringe on God's unlimited sovereignty. God gives them power, not as an essential part of their nature, but rather by creating it for them, again and again, at the very moment they choose to act. In other words, humans have volition, but they have no power of their own. This was to preserve God's matchless power, while giving humans a say in the acts for which they would be held accountable on Judgment Day. For actions to take place, God ceaselessly doles out power, allowing humans to obey and disobey God's commands and prohibitions. In this way, they "obtain" the merits and demerits of their acts.²

Even more controversial was the question of divine speech. God's message, all agreed, could be found in the Qur'an. It was God's speech. But humans recited it, and some did so less beautifully than others. Was it still God's speech when it emerged from the mouths of humans? Was the Qur'an divine and thus uncreated, that is, eternal? Or was it created like the humans who recited it and the paper on which it was written? As God's speech, it was surely divine. After all, it had come from God. Some thus concluded that it was uncreated. How could anything that belongs essentially to God, such as his speech, be created? God's speech, many held, had always been with God even before it had been communicated to the world on the tongue of Muhammad. This meant that divine speech, the Qur'an, had been around as long as God. The Qur'an, like God, was also eternal. But was it also eternally uncreated when humans recited it? Was it still God's speech when humans uttered it in discordant fashion? Could words that emerged from human mouths be eternally uncreated? The sounds humans made when they uttered the wordings of divine speech were produced by vocal cords and very much depended on how one positioned one's tongue in the mouth, but they were also the words of God. Did the Qur'an remain uncreated when humans recited it using manifestly created organs of speech and in sometimes all-too-human ways bereft of the beauty befitting God's speech?³

Theo-political controversy

The matter was so weighty that the caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–33) instituted what is known as the Inquisition (*al-mihna*).⁴ Its agents had the mandate to interrogate religious scholars about their position on the stature of the Qur'an. The caliph sided with those holding to a created stature even if acknowledging the Qur'an to be a message from God. It is not entirely clear why he took this position. He may have seen it as a way to claim the mantle of supreme religious authority in Islam.⁵ If the Qur'an were uncreated, that is, divine, then who were humans, even caliphs, to interpret it? They simply had

to accept its wordings at face value, whether comprehensible to the human mind or not. Thus, by insisting that the Qur'an was created, the caliph was claiming the right to determine what it meant. This would give him the religious authority to unite the Abode of Islam under his rule after the war of succession he had fought against his half-brother, al-Amīn, first heir to their father, Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809). Most went along with the caliph's policy, which was implemented only towards the end of his reign, but one scholar is remembered today for his defiant resistance: Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855). Under interrogation, he refused to take a position, either that the Qur'an was created or that it was uncreated.⁶ It was not simply a matter of keeping silent to preserve his life. Rather, Ibn Hanbal held that nothing could be said about God that could not be found in the texts of revelation. Humans should thus not speculate about God. Ibn Hanbal was not averse to scriptural interpretation, but for him, the purpose of scriptural interpretation was limited to clarifying the apparent meaning of the revealed text.⁷ It did not include speculation about divine matters. On this topic, since the Qur'an offered no information about it being created or uncreated, humans, too, should remain silent. In the eyes of a more learned class of scholars, Ibn Hanbal appeared a buffoon for claiming that the Qur'an was neither created nor uncreated. How could it be both? One had to take a position—or appear confused (that is, skeptical about the mind's ability to know the nature of things, in this case, the nature of divine speech). Was the message of Islam to be obscure to human minds?

Looming above all was the question of God's location. Is God—the Almighty and Majestic—somewhere? And if he is somewhere, located in a place, does this mean that he has a body, making him humanlike in some sense? After all, if he were located in a place, it would follow that he has a body, since to be in a place means to have a body such that one could be somewhere rather than nowhere. The opposite view was no less problematic: If God is not somewhere, is he nowhere? And if he is nowhere, how are the faithful to relate to him? Or perhaps he is neither somewhere nor nowhere but rather everywhere? That would seem to solve the dilemma. If he is everywhere, it would not be necessary to assume he has a body of his own, since, being everywhere, he would not need a body in order to be somewhere, that is, in a particular place. But this was only to resolve one contradiction by creating another: Saying that God was everywhere was a way to avoid ascribing a body to God. But if God were everywhere, would this not imply that he is in all bodies? To say that God—the Exalted—is everywhere would mean that he is inside birds and beasts of prey and the innards of the human body. Is this to say that God is inside one's bowels?

Odd as these questions might sound, they had place in the debates of ninth-century Baghdad. They did not issue from fanciful meanderings of minds given to scholastic speculation. The Qur'an itself uses anthropomorphic language to describe God. God has hands, eyes, and a face. There are even canonical reports that Muhammad saw his Lord in the form of a young man:

beardless, curly haired, and clothed in a green garment.⁸ The greatest controversy centered on verses in the Qur'an that describe God mounting his throne after having completed the work of creation. This would seem to offer evidence that God was somewhere, namely, on his throne. God was located in a place, and so he would have to have a body. How could one deny the words of the Qur'an? The Qur'an was God's speech, not the writings of man. Who was man to fathom the deeper meanings of divine speech? It was best not to inquire into it—better to accept it piously, as Ibn Hanbal claimed, even if it was not comprehensible to the human mind. After all, if we question the anthropomorphic qualities the Qur'an ascribes to God, what is to stop us from questioning all the attributes by which God is described in his book? If he is not actually on his throne, then maybe he is not actually merciful as the Qur'an says. Maybe God is a liar even if the Qur'an says he is truthful. Maybe he did create the world in jest even if the Qur'an says he does nothing in vain. If one is to doubt what the Qur'an says about God having mounted his throne, then why not doubt all that it says about God?⁹

This would lead to fideism of the worst kind, where the faithful accept descriptions of God even if incomprehensible to the mind. It would require them to live in the greatest confusion about God. They might hope he was just to the righteous and merciful to penitent sinners, but if they could not accept the wordings of the Qur'an at face value, how could they know what to expect on Judgment Day? This also had important consequences for human understandings of cause and effect. If God is deceptive, such that what seems good to humans is actually bad according to God, and what seems bad is actually good, how might I possibly know if my actions find favor in God's eyes? Even more dauntingly, how might I understand the causal relation between what I do and the effects issuing from my actions? Maybe God only made it seem that there is a connection between the effects issuing from my actions and the purposes for which I undertake them. Oddly, the rationality of existence depended on the veracity of God's speech in scripture.

If, then, there were no causal nexus between my actions and the purposes for which I undertake them, I would have no way of knowing whether I was on the side of God or the side of Satan. Thus, one's fate on Judgment Day was very much dependent on the existence of a recognizable system of cause and effect in this world. If one were not certain that God had created the world with intelligible order, how was one to act in the hope that what one did—good and bad—would result in merits and demerits on Judgment Day, to say nothing of the comprehensibility of the workings of the world themselves apart from questions of divine favor and disfavor? One could take the opposite approach and say that God would judge people as he wished irrespective of their merits and demerits: In his absolute sovereignty, God was free to reward the sinner with paradise and punish the righteous in the flames of hell. But this only underscored the point. Did God's ways have anything in common with the ways by which his creatures understood the nature of things?

Such questions applied not only to individuals but also to society as a whole. If the ways of the world were not comprehensible, if men did not naturally respond to certain stimuli out of fear or desire, as seemed to be the case, how might the ruling class know how to channel the impulses of the masses, directing them towards what benefitted society and away from what harmed it? But if God were deceiving us when it came to the apparent meaning of the Qur'an, including such things as his location, why would he not also be deceiving us about the ways of the world? If this were the case, we could never know whether what we do has any merit in the eyes of God or even makes any sense in terms of building up a virtuous society. We would be left in confusion about our own standing with God and how we are to act in the world. When asked about the most significant issues of existence, we would only be able to say, "I do not know." We would be skeptics. Significantly, then, the possibility of attaining divine favor by living the Muslim way of life was tied to the response one gave to the question of God's location. Certain individuals, it is reported, actually stopped praying for periods of time, claiming they could know nothing for certain about the God to whom they were commanded to pray.¹⁰ These were extreme cases, but they demonstrate what was at stake in the theological wrangling of the day.

Skepticism

Believers faced difficult choices in the ninth century. None of the leading figures of the day went the way of blind faith, that is, fideism in the sense described above, where one willingly approaches God in complete ignorance. But there was a range of theological views that left a deep impact on Muslim discussions about God for centuries to come and continue to reverberate to this day. In what follows, we will consider the confusion that resulted from the varied clashes in the ninth century over the meaning of God's message as revealed to Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia. We will see how these debates embraced elements of skepticism. Skepticism is not the same as atheism. A kind of atheism did exist: It involved a rejection not of the existence of God but of the revealed message of Islam as the source of truth. Those who publicly dismissed the truth claims of Islam, a rather small group, have been dubbed free thinkers.¹¹ The texts of this period refer to rejection of the truths of Islam not in terms of doubt or confusion but repudiation (*juhūd*).

In contrast to this quasi-atheism, there was also a kind of skepticism. It did not involve rejection of the truths of Islam but rather perplexity about them. Skepticism in this sense describes people who found themselves at a loss before the endless contradictions of the day. They did not reject Islam but rather suffered from confusion (*ḥayra*), a malady that many a scholar sought to treat in his writings. The texts of the period, unlike the dim view towards atheism, hold out hope for the restoration (*rujū'*) of a person stricken by the illness of skeptical confusion to a healthy state of certainty.¹²

Skepticism was not necessarily seen as a bad thing. Many saw it as integral to the scholarly venture. One should not blindly accept a position simply because someone says it is true.¹³ One should know for oneself that it is true. To do so requires a skeptical posture, at least initially. One should have reservations about a position before knowing the arguments for and against it. Skepticism in this sense is a temporary stage on the way to certainty in contrast to the permanent state of atheism (again, in this context, not rejection of the existence of God but of Islam's revelation as the source of truth). If one is sufficiently intelligent but has doubts about a position and yet still does not accept compelling arguments for or against it, then one can rightly be accused of stubbornness (*'unūd*). In the scholastic language of the day, stubbornness was the opposite of impartiality (*insāf*), the quality of those who submitted to truth when it was presented to them through convincing evidence and argumentation. One might need to suspend judgment (*tawaqquf*) when faced with abstruse matters prior to knowing them for oneself. But one should not remain trapped in ambiguity (*shubha*). Eventually, one has to "return" to certainty after confusion. One might be confused about God's location, the created or uncreated stature of the Qur'an, and the possibility of knowing whether or not one stands in God's favor, but knowledge is possible; one had to achieve the clarity of certainty. One could not pass through life in a state of confusion, never quite sure where truth lies. This would have potentially devastating consequences for the moral fabric of society: Knowledge about life's fundamental principles could not be entirely elusive.

Skepticism, then, is not about denying the truth but rather about being at a loss, that is, confused, as to where truth lies, especially when one is faced with two mutually contradictory positions that seem equally plausible. They both make sense, but both cannot be true. The Qur'an cannot be both created and uncreated, for example, and yet this was the position of Ibn Hanbal, at least during the Inquisition, since he felt the texts of revelation offered no basis on which to accept one position over the other. This caused his rivals to accuse him and his followers of being confused about God (that is, about what could and should be known about God for the beliefs of Islam to seem rationally compelling and not obscure or absurd).

Islam the civilization: Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr al-Jāhīz (d. 869)

Islam came to maturity as a civilization in the ninth century. It was no longer the pietistic movement that had emerged from the tribal context of seventh-century Arabia. Vast conquests gave it imperial reach, ushering Islam into the matrix of high culture as embodied in the philosophy of Greece, the wisdom of Persia, and the science of India. Translations into Arabic of a vast range of scholarly works began as early as the eighth century: works on medicine, astronomy, and zoology; ethics and statecraft; logic and rhetoric. A mix of motives prompted the Abbasids to support and fund this large-scale translation activity.¹⁴ They patronized translators, many of whom were

Christians with knowledge of Syriac and Greek, and they financed translation centers where the scholarly heights that humanity had achieved prior to the rise of Islam were reworded into Arabic and thereby brought into the world of Islam. This activity, reaching its height in the ninth century, added extraordinary complexity to the theological debates of the day. Other ways of thinking about God quickly became available alongside the message of Muhammad and they did not always fit easily with it. The texts of revelation remained central, but Islam would be reshaped in the cultural ways of the Greeks, Persians, and Indians. The elite members of society would be educated in literature, history, and philosophy, alongside the Qur'an and Hadith, affording them knowledge not only of the ways of God but also—and no less importantly—of the ways of man. It was knowledge of human nature as much as divine commands and prohibitions that enabled the ruling class to govern society effectively and bring about virtuous order in it. The ruling class saw this task as their duty entrusted to them by God. As successors to Muhammad, they saw themselves as God's representatives, custodians of the divine mandate, spelled out in the Qur'an, to live righteously. To achieve this task, they needed to know the ways of man as much as those of God, making the scholarly achievements of other cultures as indispensable as the message of Muhammad.

It is important to see the theological debates of the ninth century within this context. The larger question was the relation of Islam to the prevailing culture of the period, a question still at play today even if the context—now globalizing—is quite different. Would Muslims live in suspicion of human culture, looking askance, for example, at courtly life, where savants and scientists competed for patronage from the ruling class? Would they look dubiously at patterns of thought at play in the scholarly achievements of the Greeks, Persians, and Indians? Some even claimed that the knowledge adopted from these cultural traditions was more useful for human society and even more compelling to the human mind than the verses of the Qur'an. Would Muslims embrace these traditions of knowledge that had preceded Islam, seeing in them a happy ally of the Qur'an, whereby human thinking might work in tandem with divine speech for a common purpose? The stakes were enormous in these and related questions. They would shape attitudes towards the Qur'an as a message from God with verses ascribing anthropomorphic qualities to him. They would also shape attitudes about the intelligibility of life. Was clarity to come from divine speech or from human thought or a combination of the two?

No figure of the ninth century stands out more than Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr al-Jāhīz (d. 869). Born in Basra, he was a highly skilled *littérateur*, erudite in all branches of knowledge, rationalist in his religious outlook, and a close ally of the caliphs in Baghdad in their efforts to rid the faithful of the obscurantist and socially disruptive impact of anthropomorphizing scholars, who seemed capable of rallying the masses at will. Jahiz was a central figure in the intellectual and rhetorical battle with these scholars, who were by no means unintelligent or unpersuasive. That was the problem. They were able to influence

the commoners and could make them believe things about God that Jahiz saw as patently absurd. These so-called anthropomorphists, the likes of Ibn Hanbal, argued in apparently logical fashion, but it always led to the strangest of results. You might think you were speaking about God's location, challenging the idea that he exists corporeally in a single place such as the throne to which the Qur'an refers. But suddenly you found yourself accused of claiming that God is present in your bowels. There was no point in discussing such matters with people who appeared to speak in reasonable ways but left you wondering in the end whether their heads were screwed on straight.

Consider the treatise written in refutation of a group known as the Jahmiyya by a follower of Ibn Hanbal, Abū Sa'īd al-Dārimī (d. 896). The Jahmiyya took their name from Jahm Ibn Ṣafwān (d. 745), a scholar killed in a rebellion during the waning years of the Umayyad dynasty (661–750). Little is known of him or the group that bore his name. Given the invective hurled against them by al-Darimi, it is clear that their thinking caused quite a stir. Jahm, heavily influenced by Hellenistic philosophy, was famous for claiming that God is nothing.¹⁵ He did not mean that there was no deity but rather that God should not be called a thing (*shay'*) since that would suggest that he was located in a specific place. The only alternative was to refer to him as "no thing," but this meant that believers could never be certain about their knowledge of God since the only thing that could be said about him with certainty was that he is nothing. Jahm also claimed that God could in no way be defined. As the source of all being, God could not be said to possess being in any way. He was beyond being and thus beyond anything the human mind could comprehend. For this reason, the Jahmiyya were accused of stripping God of all attributes and qualities, including the very ones by which he describes himself in the Qur'an. Did this make God a liar? Did it require one to be a skeptic about what could be known about God? In the cosmopolitan milieu of Baghdad where Islam was being fashioned anew, ideas and beliefs of every imaginable kind commingled and sometimes clashed: A learned scholar had to demonstrate that his creed was intellectually respectable, and this made it increasingly difficult to accept at face value the verses in the Qur'an ascribing anthropomorphic qualities to God. Jahm stood at the forefront of this effort to explain Islam in philosophical categories, thereby countering the charges of anthropomorphism. But, as noted above, since suspicions about some verses could slide into suspicions about all verses and even the Qur'an as a whole, the need to refute the Jahmiyya became urgent. This was especially true for the followers of Ibn Hanbal. The position of the Jahmiyya rendered God's message in the Qur'an little more than drivel. The refutation of the Jahmiyya by al-Darimi, cast in the form of a theological debate, bears the marks of the controversy over God's location (particularly the debate over God mounting the throne):

This group [that is, the Jahmiyya] acknowledged the verses of the Qur'an that ascribe anthropomorphic qualities to God, but they then reversed

their claim. **They said:** Allah is in every place and no place is devoid of him. **We responded:** You have reversed your claim that the Lord has mounted his throne by claiming that he is in every place. **They said:** We interpret the mounting of the throne to mean having mastery over it and being above it. **We responded:** Is there any place that he does not have mastery over and is not above? Yet he singled out the throne, among all places, with the language of mounting. It is repeatedly mentioned in many places in his book [that is, the Qur'an]. What is the meaning for singling out the throne if, as you say, he mounts all things as he—the blessed and exalted—mounts the throne? This does not stand up to the norms of argumentation. You would have to raise doubts about the falsehood and impossibility of God mounting his throne rather than simply denying it, and yet you use it to bring people into error. Do you see what results when you say that he is in every place and in every creature? Was God one god before creating the creation and the places [that is, the world]? **They said:** Yes. **We responded:** When he created the creation and the places, was he not capable of remaining as he was in pre-eternity without being in a particular place and without ending up in his creation and the places that he created, according to your claim, or was it necessary that he end up in them, unable to be free of them? **They said:** Yes, certainly! **We responded:** What is it that led the holy king [that is, God], on his throne in his might and splendor, distinct from his creation, to end up in dirty places and the innards of people, birds, and beasts, and to end up, according to your claim, in every corner and stone and place? If this is his description, you have distorted the object of the people's worship [that is, God].¹⁶

It was this kind of thinking that left Jahiz deeply troubled. He would lampoon it to no end in his varied writings. For him, things had to be intelligible to the mind, and the proper use of language was the key to intelligibility. He was no partisan of the Jahmiyya, but he viewed the followers of Ibn Hanbal as anthropomorphists of the worst kind. They went too far in their efforts to counter the Jahmiyya, affirming the corporeal qualities ascribed to God in the Qur'an over Jahm's rejection of them. This forced them to conclude that God did have a body. As Jahiz saw it, the problem lay in their failure to understand the intended meanings of the words used by scripture to describe God—hands, eyes, face, and the throne. Only with a correct grasp of the usages of words could one avoid theological absurdities, especially theological speech that demeaned God, exposing the beliefs of Islam to the ridicule of other communities, especially Christians, who had greater experience in the art of theological disputation. The Christians at the time held positions of influence in Baghdad, saw themselves as heirs to the high culture of Greece, and were ready to enter into debate with Muslims. Using their theological astuteness to draw Muslims into logical contradictions, they provoked confusion among Muslims over divine matters. This, at least, was the charge of

Jahiz, as he claimed in the epigraph of this chapter: “Christians are the source of every confusion and ambiguity.”

For Jahiz, clarity of language was key. Without it there could be no intelligible speech about the ways of God or those of the world. The term for clarity, *bayān*, comes from the Qur’an. God’s message is communicated with clarity, making it immune from the distortions that other communities, that is, Jews and Christians, allegedly introduced into their scriptures. But human speech, especially in Arabic, could be imitative of divine speech. When properly used, human speech about God could attain the clarity of divine speech. This made it important that human speech be used with utmost clarity in order to avoid the theological distortions that resulted from a failure to understand language, especially the wordings of scripture.

This did not mean that human life was to be wholly circumscribed by divine speech with no room for cognitive reflection. Islam here was not simply pious submission to the literal wordings of the Qur’an. The followers of Ibn Hanbal might have wanted a life defined entirely by the dictates of divine speech, but there was no denying that the cultural achievements of the Greeks, Persians, and Indians, once translated into Arabic, could be integrated into the venture of Islam and harnessed to serve its purposes. Clarity was to become the standard of all knowledge, whether of divine revelation or human invention. Life could be remade in the image of the divine word by those who, like Jahiz, had mastered the language, by skillfully weaving words together, putting each in its proper place, so as to communicate intelligibly and persuasively, whether the question at hand was theological or zoological. There was no topic on which Jahiz did not write, from flora and fauna to the sexual habits of male and female slaves, to the veracity of the prophecy of Muhammad. In this way, he sought to demonstrate that all knowledge, whether human or divine in origin, could be set forth in the language of the Qur’an for the mind to ponder. Human speech was not divine speech, but if it was properly used, it could be like it, imparting wisdom, edifying hearts, raising minds to lofty ends, and ennobling the intentions of man.

Jahiz’s purpose in all this was nothing short of the salvation of the umma (that is, the community of Muslims). This is not to speak of salvation from sinfulness, although he would have had a concern for disobedience to God and a failure to perform religious duties. Muslim understanding of salvation shares something with its Jewish and Christian counterparts. Salvation in all three traditions has both theological and sociopolitical dimensions. Salvation is about divine action, but it also has consequences for the way people live in this world, and yet each tradition understands the divine-human system of salvation in unique ways. Jahiz very much thought of it in terms of the mechanics of society. For example, if you had a society where people were ungrateful and stingy, you could not say it was a Muslim society, since gratitude to God and generosity to others are among the hallmarks of Islam. It was thus vital for Jahiz to use language in a clear and compelling

way in order to communicate Islam's intentions effectively to the ruling class, the shapers of society. To fulfill their divine mandate, they needed the knowledge necessary to bring about a society pleasing to God. As a skilled *littérateur*, Jahiz was a public intellectual, perhaps the leading one of his day. It was his role to advise the ruling elite in Baghdad, educating them in the ways of the world so that they might effectively govern the *umma* for divine purposes.

It was the task of the governing class not only to keep peace and order but also to direct people's natural impulses away from baser ends towards nobler ones, ensuring that society functions in view of its final destiny on Judgment Day. This could not be accomplished by a simple recitation of scripture. Jahiz lived at a time when the upper echelons of society, caliphs included, showed extraordinary interest in other cultures. This fascination is reflected in his own works. Indeed, Jahiz helped shape the civilization of Islam by demonstrating with his wide-ranging writings that the knowledge produced by other cultures could be as well expressed in Arabic as in the original Greek, Persian, or Sanskrit. Indeed, in his view, it could be expressed with even greater clarity once translated into Arabic. But Jahiz was not solely interested in the business of culture. A religious purpose went hand-in-hand with his cultural project. He was a highly learned figure concerned first and foremost with salvation in the sense described above. In his view, it all comes down to language. If you cannot communicate with clarity, you cannot hope to move men's hearts. This means that good speech, effective rhetoric, is the basis of a good society where people know the truths of things and act accordingly. For this reason, Jahiz was deeply interested in the classical past, including philosophers such as Aristotle, who drew a connection between being good and being good at speaking.¹⁷ A failure to use words with clarity could undermine the moral coherency of society.

His opponents, the so-called anthropomorphists, would have agreed with him, but they would have limited good speech to divine speech apart from the more culturally expansive ways in which Jahiz understood the message of Islam. For them, the revealed message wholly encompassed the sanctity of the language of the Arabs. Nothing else was needed. The culture of Islam was reducible to its revealed texts. It was simply a question of having the perseverance to live according to the literal wordings of the Qur'an apart from human wisdom, even when such wisdom was expressed in Arabic. Life became sacred when one adhered strictly to the language of the revealed texts with cautious distance from human culture in general.¹⁸

Jahiz also saw the language of the Arabs in sacred terms, but in contrast to the anthropomorphists, he had a culturally broader view of the process of sanctification. The existence of a *communiqué* from God did not mean believers had to renounce the cultural ways of the world. They did not have to live in pietistic isolation from other sources of wisdom. Rather, insofar as human knowledge could reflect the clarity of divine speech, via expression in Arabic, it, too, had a role to play in the mechanics of salvation no less than

religious knowledge. The good man was good because he was skilled at speaking, but this did not mean he had to limit his speech to revealed texts. Rather, he only had to communicate clearly what he knew in his mind to be true; and to do so in the language of divine speech, not because he thought the Qur'an contained all knowledge but because it served as the standard of clear speaking. By linking human thinking to divine speaking in this way, the whole spectrum of human existence had ethical significance for Jahiz. Islam for him was no countercultural project but embraced all human culture, ennobling it in the process.

Jahiz saw the cultural education of the ruling class as his responsibility. They were the movers and shapers of society. This required a broad training in the achievements of all cultures, now in the language of the Arabs and thus part of the emergent civilization of Islam. Arabic was sacred for Jahiz, as it was for his anthropomorphist opponents, but in contrast to them, he saw it as the foundation of the polity and not simply as the agent of a religious community set apart from this world. Clarity of language, *bayān*, was to be the agent of salvation by communicating truth and inspiring ethical action, making it the basis of the good society in Islam, one worthy of divine favor. It is thus right to see the wide-ranging literary production of Jahiz as entirely religious in character even if it addressed topics well beyond the scope of the prophetic heritage and its accompanying religious sciences. Ironically, the need to build a society pleasing to God drove Jahiz to write on varied topics of the most human sort.

All aspects of culture, then, could be intelligibly connected—via Arabic—to the purposes of God. The writings of Aristotle thus had as much place in the civilization of Islam as the sayings of Muhammad. If the culture of the world could not be grasped in all its humanity, it could not be ennobled in the language of the Arabs, which was also the language of God. One therefore had to understand the causal connections of the world, the natural impulses of man, the fears and desires that pushed and pulled humans as individuals and societies. In this way, the ruling elite could guide the masses towards their destined end in God, keeping them from succumbing to baser instincts that put society as a whole at risk. To form society in the image of Islam, it was necessary to gather together all beneficial knowledge, irrespective of its origin, and communicate it with clarity in Arabic.

Anti-anthropomorphism

It is no surprise that Jahiz criticized his anthropomorphist opponents for lack of clarity in speaking about God. Their failure to understand the language of scripture resulted in theological scandal, especially the idea that God had a body. Jahiz responded to this failure of language, no less a failure of theology, by associating his anthropomorphist opponents with Christianity. What better way to discredit them? Christians, too, Jahiz argued, failed to understand language, the language of scripture above all, resulting in flawed understandings

of biblical references to the sonship of God. If they could only understand the way their own scriptures used words, they would know, Jahiz claimed, that such references were not to be taken literally. Alas, they too ended by thinking of God in corporeal terms. Jahiz thus dismissed the claims of his Muslim opponents by association. Like Christians, they failed to understand the norms of language, ending up in the abyss of theological ignorance.

A failure to understand language led not only to theological error but also to ethical disorder. Those who do not understand language err not only in their beliefs but also in their deeds and actions. Confusing words, that is, thinking one thing means another, jeopardizes one's standing before God, putting at risk the divine favor of the community as a whole. For example, you might err in thinking that to be miserly is to be thrifty and economical. As a result, you count miserliness as a virtue, thinking you are acting righteously by cultivating the habits of a miser. But in Arabic, the word for miserliness (*bukhl*) is closely associated with the word for unbelief (*kufur*),¹⁹ which is the opposite of the word for gratitude (*shukr*). Thus, by confusing one word for another, you end up living entirely at odds with the expectations of Muslim society where miserliness is tantamount to infidelity! Generosity towards others is a way to be thankful to God. After all, God provisioned you with all that you possess, so you cannot claim it as your own. A community that cannot understand what it means to be thankful to God but only hordes its possessions cannot be a community that is pleasing to God but effectively denies God with its ingratitude. In this sense, clarity of language was vital to the community's standing before God.

Thus, for Jahiz, words, beliefs, and actions are woven together in a single matrix of Islam. Jahiz actually wrote a lengthy treatise on the subject of misers, and his goal there, in echo of his writings against anthropomorphism, is to show that the failure to comprehend language leads to ethical breakdown. He begins his treatise on misers by accusing people of confusing words when they believe miserliness to be thrift and stinginess, economy.²⁰ As if to make the connection between words, beliefs, and actions, Jahiz uses the same terms in a treatise against anthropomorphism, in which he claims that those who mix up their words—and thus beliefs—about God are like people who distort the meanings of their actions, construing flight from battle as tactical withdrawal and miserliness as economy.²¹ Thus, by composing a parody of misers who think of themselves as the godliest of believers, Jahiz is actually digging at his anthropomorphist opponents, essentially accusing them of sophistry, that is, a false but seemingly true use of words. Sophistry, eloquence in speaking on all matters yet with no commitment to truth, is the height of confusion. It might appeal to the ear, but it is ultimately devoid of truth. Sophistry masquerades as clarity but fails to communicate truth and inspire truly noble action. It is speech and nothing more, rhetorical flare with no intelligibility and therefore bereft of purpose.²²

The demand that language be used in a comprehensible fashion is the hallmark of Jahiz's writings. He is not simply ridiculing his opponents for

failing to grasp the meanings of words. He is also establishing standards for speaking about God, making him a pioneer in the consolidation of theology as a science in Islam. It is natural to think of God in familiar and even humanlike terms rather than abstractions that make it difficult to relate to him. It is no wonder that his anthropomorphist opponents were known for mystical propensities. By conceiving of God in human form, they could more easily commune with him. Jahiz denounced the practice of imagining God corporeally even if the purpose was to foster communion with God.²³ He insisted that it was possible to attain clarity about God without corporeal images, but he recognized a place for doubt within the process of attaining certainty. In a monumental work, *The Book of Animals*, in which Jahiz aimed “to present ample evidence for the fact that every single being points to the Creator,”²⁴ he exhorts his reader to understand the causes of doubt in order to know better what leads to certainty:

You should know the occasions of doubt and conditions that cause it in order thereby to know the occasions of certainty and conditions that cause it. Learn to know doubt in what is doubtful. That will be useful even if only to acquaint you with the habit of suspending judgment [*tawaqquf*] about something prior to affirming it.²⁵

Even if doubt is to be removed, it still has a role to play, at least as a contrast to certainty. Jahiz remarks that the unlearned masses do not know the purpose of doubt as they fail to suspend judgment before accepting or rejecting a point of view. They do not pass through what he calls the “third” state—that is, the state of doubt—between acceptance and rejection.²⁶ Since, as he states elsewhere, the masses know nothing of the suspension of judgment, the beliefs they hold are based not on the processes of their minds but on the vagaries of their passions. They accept or reject a point of view not because they know it to be true or false but only because it pleases or annoys them.²⁷ For Jahiz, you have to pass through the state of doubt, that is, the third state between acceptance and rejection, where you suspend judgment about a point of view before reaching certain knowledge for or against it. One of Jahiz’s teachers, a figure by the name of Abū l-Isḥāq al-Nazzām, makes this very point (and it is worth noting his distinction between skeptic and atheist):

I held disputations with atheists, both the doubter [*shākk*] and the repudiator [*jāḥid*]. I found skeptics more insightful about the essence of theology [*kalām*] than repudiators. The doubter is closer to you than the repudiator. There has never been certainty that has not been preceded by doubt, and no one has passed from holding one belief to holding another without passing through a state of doubt.²⁸

Jahiz follows this with another quote, attributed to Muḥammad Ibn al-Jahm al-Barmakī, a member of the ruling class during the reign of al-Ma’mun and

also a scholar and littérateur in his own right. The quote is important for its association of confusion (*ḥayra*) with the state of doubt, that is, the “third” state between acceptance and rejection. It may well be necessary to suspend judgment prior to the attainment of certain knowledge, but one is still to “return” to clarity after confusion; confusion is not meant to be a permanent condition. Indeed, those in a state of confusion should take their doubt as a spur to reach clarity:

Ibn al-Jahm said: How the return of the confused [*mutaḥayyir*] gives me hope! That is because everyone whom confusion [*ḥayra*] has deprived of certainty has clarification [*tabayyun*] as the object of his desire, and whoever finds the object of his desire takes joy in it.²⁹

This quote suggests that “confusion” (*ḥayra*), given its close association with “doubt” (*shakk*) in the quote immediately before it, was actually part of the scholarly terminology used to describe a system of skepticism. This is confirmed in one of Jahiz’s short treatises, *The Superiority of the Belly to the Back*.³⁰ His purpose has nothing to do with bellies and backs even if they constitute the content of the treatise. His goal is to persuade his scholarly adversaries to realize the confusion of their ways. As in his work on misers, here, too, he suggests that the discord in their ranks is due to the fact that they confuse the meaning of one word for another. As a result, their thinking is shot through with error and contradiction, making it easy for others to cast suspicion on their views.³¹ Truth is clear to those who seek it, but these people, due to their stubbornness, fail to clarify their confusion and “return” to truth.

Jahiz is ready to offer a hand, taking it upon himself to show them the virtues God has bestowed on “bellies.” In this fashion, he seeks to help the thoughtful (*mufakkir*) return to certainty; the confused (*mutaḥayyir*) attain insight; and the stubborn (*ʿanīd*) be straightened out. The fact that this group cannot even agree among themselves indicates that they have no method, no principle by which to think clearly. As a result, they accept things without thinking about them methodically. They have no scholarly technique. As a result, they only spew words, which, devoid of thought, amount to nothing more than unfounded allegations. They actually do not know what they mean with the words they use and are thus unable to notice the egregious contradictions in their own positions:

We have seen a people that pretend to wisdom but have no share in it. They only make allegations. They are the allies of ignorance, the followers of mistakes, the partisans of error, devotees of deficiency. The very argument they claim for themselves is used against them. They have not cleared the gunk from their hearts and the rust from their ears by taking upon themselves the work of investigating, searching, and uncovering. They have not established for themselves a principle in their minds upon

which they might base their belief and to which they might have recourse in view of the confusion [*hayra*] over their discordant views [*ikhtilāf āra'ihim*]. And so they go astray. Ignorance becomes their leader, fools their commanders-in-chief.³²

A similar strategy can be seen in *The Book of Squaring and Circling*,³³ which is a pointed parody of anthropomorphist beliefs. The work is addressed to a state official with a highly exaggerated sense of his intellectual prowess, but the real target is the silliness of anthropomorphist beliefs, as Jahiz makes clear towards the end of the work.³⁴ His addressee, a figure by the name of Aḥmad 'Abd al-Wahhāb, is named as a partisan of the Shi'a, whom Jahiz calls the Rāfiḍa. There was a strand of anthropomorphism within early Shi'ism, and Jahiz classified the Shi'a among groups who held anthropomorphist beliefs.³⁵ However, important for our purposes is the fact that when he speaks of the Rafida, he does not always mean the Shi'a. In another work, he associates the Rafida with a group known as the Nābita,³⁶ which can be translated as "the weeds," a label for the followers of Ibn Hanbal. Thus, while addressed to a state official, *The Book of Squaring and Circling* is a veiled attack against Muslims with anthropomorphist beliefs, likely the followers of Ibn Hanbal.

The named addressee, Aḥmad 'Abd al-Wahhāb, may actually be a stand-in for Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, whom Jahiz lampoons elsewhere in his writings.³⁷ He associates his addressee with the stuffed heads (*al-ḥashwiyya*),³⁸ often taken as the followers of Ibn Hanbal. He also refers to him as the author of the *Musnad*,³⁹ the title of a collection of hadiths (prophetic sayings) compiled by Ibn Hanbal and known for its vividly anthropomorphist reports. Also, on a number of occasions, Jahiz refers to the addressee as stubborn, a term he uses elsewhere to describe Ibn Hanbal.⁴⁰ (The term, it should be recalled, is associated with a state of skepticism and is cast as a threat to the order of society. If we cannot really know God and God's ways, society is lost!) Also, in a separate treatise against anthropomorphism,⁴¹ Jahiz uses language reminiscent of *The Book of Squaring and Circling*. There, he says that some anthropomorphists think of God as a body that is long, while others say, "He is a body but not with length as a circle, triangle, or square. Rather, he can only be intelligible (that is, comprehended) as a body."⁴² All of this strongly suggests that *The Book of Squaring and Circling* is actually a broadside against anthropomorphism.

This is further confirmed by Jahiz's attacks against his addressee for failing to understand the usages of words, a charge he makes elsewhere against holders of anthropomorphist beliefs. For example, he accuses his addressee of not knowing the precise meaning of envy, taking it to mean competition, or of miserliness, thinking it means moderation.⁴³ This is reflected in the many references to the physicality of the addressee, who is confused over the dimensions of his own body.⁴⁴ Jahiz speaks of the dimensions of length and width as demonstrative proofs and corroborating evidence against the

addressee, that is, against his anthropomorphist beliefs.⁴⁵ He is obsessed with his own physical dimensions but is unable to understand them as they really are. Jahiz goes on to describe him in quasi-divine terms for several paragraphs. In this way, he mocks anthropomorphists by parodying the corporeal fetishes of a person who thinks he is more intelligent than all others. In fact, his ideas about God are so abominable they could split the earth.⁴⁶ Jahiz calls for impartiality (*inṣāf*), which is the opposite of stubbornness, and expresses his hope that his addressee will seek God's favor rather than that of the masses.

This is the problem. The addressee, thinking he is the most intelligent of all, is actually no better than the masses. Like them, he bases his belief on whim rather than scholarly inquiry. This is due to his inability to suspend judgment,⁴⁷ leading him to accept the most outlandish of reports. In other words, he cannot claim certain knowledge for his beliefs, since, as seen earlier, suspension of judgment is vital for scholarly inquiry and the attainment of certainty. This, of course, only begets further confusion. In the end, the addressee is unable to understand language and the meanings of words by which a compelling argument (*ḥujja*) is distinguished from a faulty one (*shubha*), leading him to mingle doubt with certainty. In other words, the addressee, a likely stand-in for Ibn Hanbal, does not know how to think with clarity, making him the source of the skeptical confusion plaguing the umma.

Throughout the work, Jahiz plies his addressee with all sorts of questions, many of which refer to people and events from bygone times: What is your view of the Flood? When did human tongues become divided into many languages? Where are 'Ād and Thamūd (two ancient tribes mentioned in the Qur'an)? How long ago did the mountains appear? Is Hermes the same person as Enoch? Is John the Baptist the same person as Elijah? How did idolatry come into being? How long ago were all people one nation with one language? And how many generations did it take for Africans to become black and Slavs white? All of this is a form of jest. Jahiz does not expect his addressee to have answers to such elusive questions but rather hopes to impress upon him the importance of suspending judgment. Just because one reads reports about times past in the texts of revelation does not mean one immediately understands their import. It is for this reason that he looks askance at reports about long-lived men, alleged to have lived several hundred years. As such, they would have known the Prophet and his companions and would therefore be able to verify reports of their miracles for later generations who might view them incredulously. However, even if the idea of long-lived figures might offer a useful way to dispel suspicions about reports of the prophetic past, it is actually the heart of the problem for Jahiz. His addressee accepts such reports at face value, thinking them to be reliably transmitted by long-lived men, without first suspending judgment in order to understand the workings of history rationally. This only begets skeptical confusion, since the idea of long-lived men cannot itself be verified. Jahiz reminds his addressee

that references to long-lived men are found only in poetry, which is not a reliable source of information about the past:

Narrators have mentioned long-lived men in poetry and have constructed reports about that, but we have found no decisive testimony for that. We cannot refute it since it is not outside the realm of possibility, but we also cannot affirm it since there is no corroborating evidence for it. You know the confusion [*hayra*] that results from doubt [about such matters] and, in turn, the anxiety [over truth] that results from confusion.⁴⁸

Jahiz does think history can be known, but he sees it more in terms of rational inquiry than simple reports of past figures and events. In his view, reports about the past, if sound, should be taken as the equivalent of eye-witness evidence.⁴⁹ However, such reports pertain to the general workings of history, not the particularities of the past. History is not a matter of accepting or rejecting reports, certainly not those transmitted by allegedly long-lived men. Rather, as events in the present, so those of the past unfolded in intelligible fashion. Just as one cannot always trust one's own eyes when it comes to events in the present, making it necessary to test information against reason,⁵⁰ so, too, knowledge of history is not simply a matter of hearing reports of the past. One has to think critically about them as part of a nexus of causally related events.

Jahiz applies this historical method in another treatise, *Arguments for Prophecy*, where he ties together reflections on the innate variety of the human species, the causes of harmony in society, and the importance of knowing history. His point is twofold. First, knowledge of history is important since it offers us lessons to consider. Where would humans be without knowledge of the past? Second, given the tendency of humans to disagree, it is inconceivable that people would have agreed on the veracity of a single report if it were not true. One should not accept reports of past events simply because long-lived men are alleged to have witnessed them. However, the fact that a variety of peoples transmitted the same report constitutes rational grounds for accepting it, especially when it refers to extraordinary events from the life of the Prophet, such as his predictions of future events or knowledge of people's thoughts—things people who had not met in advance could not have possibly agreed on accepting if not true. Since many peoples from many places reported such things without having met, precluding the possibility of collusion, such reports are likely true since humans are generally prone to disagree. If not true, there would not be such agreement about them.

Jahiz is thus criticizing his addressee in *The Book of Squaring and Circling* for his failure to approach historical reports with a measure of skepticism, that is, the skepticism proper to scholarly inquiry—the third state between acceptance and rejection of a claim. The addressee's failure to apply this critical method only results in greater confusion where people are led to accept wondrous tales that do not meet the standards of scholarly inquiry. This makes

Islam look like a bundle of fallacies to more discerning minds. The problem is that the addressee is simply stubborn, disputing his theological adversaries only with the goal of besting them. He is nothing but a sophist, skilled at speaking but with no real concern for truth. His only aim is to vanquish his opponents. This has deleterious effects for discourse about the truths of God,⁵¹ and so Jahiz sees it as his duty to draw the attention of his addressee to appropriate standards of clear speaking and rational thinking.

The foregoing demonstrates that *ḥayra* had a precise, even technical sense in the scholarly discourse of the ninth century, referring to a skeptical state of mind, that is, the inability to determine whether a claim is true or false. There were two general scenarios. In the first, one might intentionally suspend judgment, at least temporarily, when faced with two equally plausible but mutually contradictory claims. Both could not be true, but one had to determine for oneself the true claim rather than blindly accepting one and rejecting the other as the masses and their anthropomorphist leaders did. This required a suspension of judgment, but the ultimate goal was certain knowledge. However, in the second scenario, confusion was no longer a purposeful part of the process of scholarly inquiry. Rather, it was the result of discordant opinions that only multiplied whenever people spoke about God without knowledge of rational methods of inquiry and correct usages of words. Jahiz laid the blame for this cacophony of beliefs at the feet of Ibn Hanbal and his followers. He called them stuffed heads. They spoke to no end but with no clarity and no rationality. This resulted not only in the most absurd declarations about the godhead but also in a bundle of theological contradictions, the existence of which only fostered uncertainty about the truths of God. How could Muslims claim to have certain knowledge about God, especially in the face of Christian counterclaims, when their own theological views were mutually contradictory? They could not all be true! According to Jahiz, it was the camp of Ibn Hanbal that fed into the machinations of Christians, fostering doubts about the truths of Islam well beyond the skeptical reservations required for the progress of scholarly inquiry. As we will see in the following chapter, such a situation would lead some to contend that no certain knowledge whatsoever could be attained about religious matters.

Confusion in this sense applied wherever there was a lack of clarity, whatever the theological issue in question, but it featured most prominently in attacks on anthropomorphist beliefs. Those who held anthropomorphist beliefs were bound to be confused.⁵² There was no way to “return” to certainty if one held anthropomorphist beliefs, at least not in the theological milieu of ninth-century Baghdad with its increasingly sophisticated expectations of theological discourse. Anthropomorphists were forever betwixt and between, trapped in the mutually contradictory position that God was both somewhere and not somewhere. They claimed he had a body, since he was on his throne as stated in the Qur’an, and yet they also claimed that his body was uncreated: God was the creator, after all, and so could not be created in any way. His speech, the Qur’an, was also uncreated even when it was

humans who gave sound to it through vocal cords and tongues that were indubitably created. In sum, those who claimed that God had a body were bound to be confused, that is, caught unawares between mutually contradictory positions, and they inflicted upon the umma a more permanent form of skepticism or confusion about the nature of God.

More anti-anthropomorphism

Jahiz was not the only scholar of this period to tie anthropomorphism to skeptical confusion. Another was al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm (d. 860). It is unlikely the two ever met, but they do share common theological sentiment, including similar attitudes to anthropomorphist beliefs. Qasim grew up in Medina and lived in Egypt for much of his adult life. In Egypt, he earned a reputation for prowess in theological disputation, notably with Christians, whose thinking seems to have left a mark on his theological reflection. Qasim was also a direct descendant of ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, whom all branches of the Shi‘a revere as the commander of the faithful and first of the imams. Qasim did not claim to be imam. His attitudes towards questions of leadership in Islam were actually rather ambivalent.⁵³ While he would come to be recognized as one of the imams of the Zaydi branch of Shi‘ism, he seems to have dedicated himself to theological questions, and in that sense, he made important contributions to the formation of Shi‘ism.

Among Qasim’s many treatises is a refutation of Christianity in which he equates belief in the sonship of God with polytheism. He likens it to pagan belief in the divinity of the planets. He also wrote a treatise on the divine throne (*‘arsh*) and the divine footstool (*kursī*), terms in the Qur’an that generated considerable confusion, as we have seen. In another work, *The Book for the Seeker of Guidance*,⁵⁴ he argues for a figurative rather than a literal reading of the anthropomorphic language of the Qur’an. Qasim, it is clear, shared many theological concerns with Jahiz, even if his writings do not have the same cultural breadth. Like Jahiz, he sought to refute anthropomorphist beliefs and to eliminate confusion by appealing to the figurative side of language along with rational argumentation. Also like Jahiz, he attacked anthropomorphist beliefs in Islam by associating them with Christianity.

At one point in his refutation of Christianity,⁵⁵ Qasim notes that the Qur’an repeatedly limits the sonship of Jesus to Mary apart from God: “Jesus son of Mary,” never “Jesus son of God.” This, he claims, should be a source of certainty and compelling proof to gladden every heart. Anyone who has a mind, he insists, Christian or non-Christian, will admit that Jesus was born from her and will not be able to deny or be at all confused (*mutaḥayyir*) about the idea that what is hers is also his, namely, a human nature and nothing more, “since Allah, may he be praised, made him her son.”⁵⁶ He reinforces his point: “No one rejects this or renounces it, only those with corrupted and confused minds (*fāsid al-‘aql wa ḥā’iruhu*).”

The Christian notion of sonship is abhorrent to Qasim. In his view, it is a type of anthropomorphism that is bound to generate the skeptical confusion that Jahiz, as seen above, strongly censures. However, like Jahiz, he offers his theological opponents a way out: If they view the sonship of Jesus in relation to Mary apart from God, confusion will give way to certainty. The problem, as Qasim saw it, is that Christian belief in the sonship of God is too close to the polytheism of the Arabs before the coming of Islam. The Qur'an derides the polytheists for claiming that God has daughters. Similarly, belief in the sonship of God is too close to the anthropomorphist beliefs that Qasim noticed among fellow Muslims in his own day. Like Jahiz, Qasim saw Christians as a convenient foil against which to expose the confusion generated by Muslims who claimed that God has a body. Christianity, too, is but a bundle of contradictions that result from people failing to view matters with impartiality (*inṣāf*) and carelessly frolicking amidst their confusion (*ḥayra*).⁵⁷

If Christians cause confusion about God, Muslims who believe God has a body are no less a problem. Qasim sets out to refute them, his goal being the establishment of certainty. He proceeds by explaining the meaning of verses in the Qur'an that make it seem that God exists in a specific place. *The Book for the Seeker of Guidance* begins with the following exercise in scriptural interpretation:

A person in confusion [*ḥayra*] might ask about the statement of Allah the Mighty and Majestic [Q 35:10], "To him [that is, God] the kindly word ascends, and he raises the good act." Such a person imagines that Allah the Exalted and Blessed is raised up in a specific place, and denounces those who claim that Allah is in every place by asking, "Does the kindly word ascend from Allah to Allah, since we say that he is in the heaven and on the earth?" Our response is that Allah the Mighty and Majestic is in all places, administering them, maintaining them, overseeing them. He does not embrace them [that is, in a physical sense], nor do they encompass him. We do not say the kindly word ascends from him to him, as if describing him as finite and limited. Rather, the kindly word ascends *from* the place [that is, in which a human uttered it] where Allah is not absent *to* heaven where he is. Allah mounted his throne. He is not absent from it. He is in the highest heavens and on earth and no private talk escapes him.⁵⁸

In other words, Qasim maintains both the rational position that God is universally present, including to the speaker uttering "the kindly word that ascends to him," and also the scriptural position that he is mounted on his throne and thus in a particular location. Interpreting the verse in this way, Qasim hopes to ward off the confusion that results from the theologically untenable belief in the corporeality of God. The challenge for Qasim, as for Jahiz, is to get people to understand what words really mean, not what they appear to mean in their literal wordings. This is not to say that the message of

the Qur'an is esoteric, concealed, and hidden to all but theological masters. The message is clear. It is a matter of understanding the figurative side of language.⁵⁹ Immediately following the above passage, Qasim turns to a lengthy discussion of the preposition "in" as used in reference to God in the Qur'an: He is *in* heaven and earth. Citing other verses where the preposition has the sense of "over and above," Qasim concludes that when the Qur'an says that God is *in* heaven and earth, it means that he oversees all things, not that he is located in a particular place. The key to sound belief is thus a sound understanding of the words of scripture.

The same concern for confusion pervades Qasim's treatise on the divine throne and divine footstool.⁶⁰ This was arguably the most controversial issue of the day, since it was more resistant to figurative interpretation than other apparently anthropomorphic qualities ascribed to God in the Qur'an. Qasim calls the issue murky and dark—at least to those whom God has handed over to confusion (*ḥayra*) and obscurity (*luḥs*).⁶¹ At one point, he warns his Muslim audience not to be like past nations that failed to heed God's message: "God sent messengers to the nations, but they had doubts about God and were confused (*shakkū fī llāh wa-taḥayyārū*)."⁶² It is not that they repudiated God as atheists but that they did not know what to make of the revelation sent to them. For this reason, in the name of his community, Qasim implores God for protection from blindness, error, confusion (*ḥayra*), and ignorance.⁶³ He then comes to the verse (Q 28:32) that narrates how God sent a warning sign to Pharaoh by having Moses put his hand in his cloak and then withdraw it transformed into a white hue. The verse instructs Moses to "press your arm to yourself without fear." The words seem straightforward, but the literal meaning of "arm" in the verse is "wing" (*janāḥ*). Are we to imagine, Qasim queries, that Moses actually had a wing like that of a bird? Only a foolish, blind, and confused (*ḥā'ir*) person would understand it in its literal sense.⁶⁴ And yet shortly thereafter he laments the plethora of ignorant, confused, and blind persons in his day.⁶⁵

Qasim's writings share much with those of Jahiz in relation to the phenomenon of confusion. Both used it particularly in reference to anthropomorphism. They may have ranked it just below atheism. It will be recalled that Jahiz's teacher, quoted above, claimed it was easier to dispute with skeptics than repudiators (that is, atheists in the sense of repudiating Islam as the source of truth). Similarly, Qasim associates confusion about God with atheism but still ranks it below outright repudiation of Islam. In the introduction to one of his works on the proof of the existence of God, he speaks of the "denier" (*munkir*) along with the confused. The two are not the same: The first rejects the truth once expounded to him, the second accepts it but does not grasp what it means, only to end by hideously distorting the truth.⁶⁶ Qasim, like Jahiz, believes clarity will come with rational inquiry into the meaning of words, especially in the area of scriptural interpretation, and yet one gets the impression from their writings that the problem was persistent. It was not so much that people were suspending judgment, holding reservations

about the truths of Islam until they could claim to know them with certainty. Rather, a bevy of discordant beliefs among Muslims posed a threat to the attainment of irrefragable certainty about God. In the view of Jahiz and Qasim, among others, the masses, including their religious spokesmen, were plagued by obscure beliefs that only left the impression on more discerning minds that certainty about God was elusive. If certainty about the truths of God was attainable, why were believers so divided?⁶⁷ And why did anthropomorphist beliefs continue to be so attractive and so destructive to the clarity and certainty supposed to mark the beliefs of Islam?

Skepticism and sufism

The phenomenon of skeptical confusion in ninth-century Baghdad would leave its mark on the world of Sufism, the spiritual heritage of Islam, suggesting that it had concrete place in the scholarly circles of the day. Sufism, like other facets of Islam, came into its own in the ninth century as a distinct branch of knowledge. One of its architects was a spiritual master by the name of Abū l-Qāsim al-Junayd of Baghdad.⁶⁸ Junayd (d. 910) wrote a number of letters, cast in the form of guidance to those seeking to advance on the spiritual path. He also wrote a handful of short treatises in which he laid out the groundwork for the science of the inner life (that is, the soul) in Islam.⁶⁹ Important for our purposes is the fact that Junayd's writings include references to confusion, but he reconfigures it. For him, confusion is not a mark of skepticism but a source of illumination. Like Jahiz, Junayd did not see confusion as a permanent state, but it had a very different meaning for the spiritual master from the one it had for the theological humanist. For Junayd, confusion served the purpose of humbling scholars. The problem, Junayd noticed, is that the acquisition of knowledge invariably leads to pride. Scholars succumb to worldly attractions: The fame they garner for their knowledge among the masses, and the patronage it earns them with the ruling class. In the ninth century, the pursuit of knowledge went hand-in-hand with the cultivation of the soul. Above all, the knowledge that God had revealed to Muhammad was to have an impact on one's life, but as Junayd observed, scholars had turned it into a worldly pursuit, but a vehicle for their own ambitions.

Much more was at stake than scholarly hypocrisy, that is, speech about God for the sake of stature in the world. As Junayd saw it, if your motive for pursuing knowledge was not pure, you would never actually reach the knowledge you pursued, since, after all, you were not pursuing the knowledge you claimed to seek for its own sake but only the glory you expected it to bring you. Junayd was the student of al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857), whose writings exhibit pointed concern for the inner life of Muslims. By his day, Islam was as much a world empire as a religious community devoted to the afterlife, and Muhasibi concluded that the community no longer took its obligatory prayers seriously. They might be in the mosque at the time for

prayer, but their minds were in the marketplace. They did not have their priorities straight. Could such prayers be acceptable to God if one was not thinking about God when praying? Muhasibi was part of a movement that worked to purify the souls of believers of all worldly inclinations. Only then could prayer to God make sense.

Junayd inherited this attitude but targeted the religious scholars, the very ones who should know better. In his view, they sought knowledge for all the wrong reasons. Declaiming on God's affairs, they saw themselves as the pillars of the community, teaching it the truths of God and the duties owed to him. But all they were doing was uttering words, words, and more words, and generating more confusion than clarity. They had actually lost their way amidst the debates and disputations in which they so eagerly participated.⁷⁰ They were speaking not for God but for themselves, for their own glory. Something was amiss in the scholarly venture itself. A greater level of clarity was needed, one that transcended words.

It will be remembered that Jahiz placed great confidence in the power of words—especially in Arabic—to express knowledge with clarity (*bayān*). Junayd certainly appreciated the power of words but was less optimistic about their ability to achieve final clarity. For this reason, he saw confusion as a source of illumination. The confusion that arose out of the debates of the day showed that words alone were inadequate to resolve religious conundrums. Jahiz, in a treatise on the art of debate, recognized the problems that arise when scholars partake in disputation only to trumpet their own voices, but he still held out hope that language, if pursued properly, could achieve clarity. Junayd, in contrast, saw confusion as a godsend since it demonstrated that clarity could not be found in words but only beyond them.

Ironically, then, confusion became the key to clarity. Since confusion invariably arose whenever scholars sought to express the truths of God in words, it offered proof that certainty could not be attained by words alone. In the end, the art of speaking was deceptive. It led to pride and the false belief that knowledge was something one obtained by one's own endeavors, as if it were something one deserved rather than a gift one received from God through no merit of one's own. Junayd was by no means calling for the end of speech about God. He recognized its importance but also its shortcomings. Words were not enough. It was not by speaking but by seeing that one reached clarity about the truth of God, which scholars debated to no end and yet always failed to realize. Junayd was calling for a higher kind of knowledge beyond what words alone could express. But to get there, it was necessary to disabuse scholars of the hubristic confidence they held in the power of their speech. Confusion offered a way to humble scholars. It was by being confused about what they thought they knew that scholars would be illuminated about God.

This was not a leap of faith in the post-modern sense where one trades reason for faith. Junayd looked askance at the theological wrangling of his day, but in his view the mind remained central to the spiritual life. In response

to the scholarly chaos, he laid the groundwork for a system of theology in which confusion had a vital place, but not to the point of dismissing the mind from the stage of theology. The role of the mind in his system was not so much to devise definitions about God as to grasp God when God was disclosed to the mind's eye. When that happens, words no longer make sense and theological definitions no longer have place. The spiritual vision leaves one baffled, perplexed, bewildered—in a word, confused. One cannot express in words what one has seen. And yet this confusion brings greater clarity about God. Junayd described the experience as a kind of intoxication. As a result of the visions one sees while in this state, one penitently realizes the errors of one's ways: One realizes that the knowledge one thought one possessed is really ignorance, and that the piety one thought one could claim is really neglectfulness of God. It is out of this state of confusion that sharper awareness of God results, as Junayd notes:

Know, then, you who consider yourself a scholar, when you return to sobriety after the confusion [*hayra*] of your state of spiritual intoxication, you will reach clarity [*tatabayyan*]. Once conscious, you will see your overwhelming ignorance. A correct recollection of what you experienced will disclose how you have been afflicted by neglectfulness of Allah. When you have recovered, the time of your past illness will become distinct. All that you thought you knew is a distraction from true awareness of God and is harmful to scholars, showing them to be in confusion [*hayra*] about the very knowledge they bear. Knowledge of Allah, mixed with obscurity and darkness, gives Allah the Exalted a case against his devotees on Judgment Day. Desist! You who are so concerned about Allah's case against you and so keen on hastening to seek safety from the intoxication, the sense of overwhelming ignorance, the recognition of neglectfulness, and the confusion (*hayra*) that comes from practicing what I prescribe.⁷¹

It is important to note that in this and other letters Junayd addresses scholars, not the theologically ignorant. In a striking reversal of categories, Junayd claims that it is not the scholar who has knowledge of the truths of God, but rather a figure he refers to as the sage, that is, the spiritual master. To reinforce the point, Junayd not infrequently criticizes those who are allegedly experts in theological matters; he even alludes to the ambiguities surrounding the question of God's location. There is no "where" when it comes to God. The concept of "where" does not apply to him.⁷² This matter leaves scholars confused (*mutahayyir*) when they try to explain it.⁷³ The problem is that scholars rely on themselves, but knowledge about God that is obtained by human efforts can only be fallible, and what is the worth of fallible knowledge about God? Junayd speaks of a coterie of spiritual masters chosen by God to represent him in this world.⁷⁴ These are the real scholars of the community, not those who expend great effort applying

figurative interpretations to the texts of revelation only to please the crowds and win the patronage of princes.

The point is that one does not get to God through one's own efforts. Pride is the result if one thinks one can figure out God on one's own. Rather, it is God who brings people to him. This, however, applies only to a select group of believers, who, unlike the self-styled scholars of the day, offer knowledge of God that is infallible since God addresses them directly. What does this mean? As noted earlier, Junayd pioneered a scholarly system that depends upon confusion as a spur to deeper clarity about God. The system is rooted in spiritual experience. One does not dispute about God. One encounters God. To show the religious basis of this idea, Junayd draws upon the Qur'an's account of the pact that God made with humanity before creation (Q 7:172). Drawing all souls from the loins of Adam, he puts to them the question: Am I not your Lord? All respond affirmatively. This is known as the day of the pact (*yawm al-mīthāq*), a time before time to which the spiritual elite can return.⁷⁵ This gives a scriptural basis to the idea that God's specially chosen ones can encounter him, and receive knowledge directly from him. They do this by returning to the way things were before creation when all stood before God.

Overarching the entire system is a particular conception of monotheism. Junayd specifies four degrees of monotheism. The lowest is the monotheism of the commoners, who recognize the oneness of God but still put their trust in created things apart from God. The highest is the monotheism of the spiritual elite. They not only recognize the oneness of God but also realize that nothing stands between them and God. It is in this highest degree of monotheism that God is disclosed to his elect. They stand before him as they did on the day of the pact.⁷⁶ This results in annihilation in the godhead whereby one is absent to oneself and present only to God and through God. One is with God beyond time and place and all indicators of worldly existence. In this meeting, one witnesses the truths of God firsthand. The result is wisdom about God. In the spiritual state, God endows them with *his* knowledge. Such knowledge is therefore nothing they can claim for themselves. Thus, it cannot beget pride. And it is true since it is from God. After meeting with God, one "separates," returning to the world so as to represent God to the faithful. One represents God not so much through words but through one's own person. The goal is not holy silence. The faithful need to be instructed. But words alone are not up to the task. The goal is to bring people to God, not to fill their ears with words.

These sages, then, are more than mere conveyors of information. Through them, God shows his mercy to his slaves (that is, humans, *raḥma li-'ibādihi*).⁷⁷ It is in their own persons that they bear God's case against humans (that is, certain knowledge about God that makes people accountable to God on Judgment Day). The argument does not proceed by words, interpretation of words, or disputation with words. The argument is embodied in the persons of God's elect. There is something about them that reminds people of God when

they see them. Muhammad apparently spoke of a class of believers, saintly figures, who, when one sees them, one is reminded of God.⁷⁸ This is God's proof against humans. The argument is not manifest in one set of words or another but in the faces of those who have been inspired by God. The proof of the pudding is not in the words but in the witness.

In sum, Junayd made confusion not simply a necessary prelude to clarity but a concomitant part of illumination. The experience of monotheism, where nothing stands between God and oneself, leaves one confused, not knowing what to say about God but deeply convinced that one knows the truth of God. Confusion had a well-delineated place on the path to God in Junayd's system. He spells out the details in a treatise on monotheism in which he connects confusion to clarity (*bayān*):

Know that the first part of the worship of Allah the Mighty and Majestic is awareness of him. Awareness of him comes with recognition of his oneness [*tawhīd*]. The system of *tawhīd* involves the negation of attributes to describe him, such as "how" and "whence" and "where." It is by Allah that one is directed to Allah. By his intervention one is directed to him by him. His intervention brings about the recognition of his oneness. Recognition of his oneness brings about belief in him. Belief in him brings about the realization of him. Realization of him brings about awareness of him. Awareness of him leads one to respond to him in what he summons one to do. Responding to him leads to ascent to him. Ascent leads one to reach him. Reaching him brings about clarity [*bayān*] about him. Clarity about him leads to confusion [*ḥayra*]. Confusion removes clarity about him. With loss of clarity, one cannot describe him. The inability to describe him brings about the truth of one's existence for him. The truth of one's existence in Allah brings about the truth of witnessing Allah where one is removed from one's own existence, and so one's existence is purified. One is where he was on the day of the pact.⁷⁹

Sufism and the legacy of confusion

Junayd's reconfiguration of confusion was seminal for Islam. Spiritual thinkers of subsequent centuries drew upon it in different ways, giving his outlook greater traction over the centuries than that of Jahiz. Before concluding this chapter, we will very briefly trace Junayd's legacy of confusion, which he located within a scholarly system constructed in part to counter the skeptical confusion that arose from the theological ambiguities of the ninth century. Three figures stand out: Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. c. 1145); Rūzbihān al-Baqlī (d. 1209), and Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240).

Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār hailed from Nishapur, a once thriving center of culture in the eastern part of today's Iran. Among his many works, the most renowned is *The Speech of the Birds*.⁸⁰ The tale narrates the quest of a group

of birds for a king. The quest is a mystical allegory for the soul's journey to the throne of God. The king whom the birds seek is known as the Simorgh, a mythic bird of Persian lore. Crucial to the story is the fact that Simorgh means "thirty birds" (*sī morgh*) in Persian. Of all the birds that begin the quest, only thirty make it. Thus, when they reach the Simorgh, that is, "thirty birds," they see themselves. In other words, the spiritual path involves a journey to a divine mystery that ultimately stands at the core of one's being. However, one can only see the reflection of God within once one has polished the mirror of one's soul through ascetical discipline and spiritual exercise. The soul, once purged of its attachments, becomes the site of divine epiphany.

The tale speaks of the many hardships the birds face. Most drop out and return to their worldly occupations. Illumination of the soul is no easy task. Those who seek God pass through all sorts of trials and temptations before reaching him. In this mystical epic, the birds cross seven valleys, each a stage that the spiritual wayfarer has to traverse on the journey to God. The sixth is the valley of confusion (*ḥayrat*).⁸¹ It is no coincidence that Attar places this valley after that of monotheism. It is the monotheism, as described above, whereby you realize that nothing stands between you and God or even separates the two of you, leaving you confused. The final valley is the valley of poverty and annihilation. There, one is absent to oneself and present only to God through God. Having passed through the confusion that results from awareness of true monotheism, one is thoroughly humbled and thus prepared to stand before God as on the day of the pact before creation.

The structure of the spiritual journey as spelled out in this tale very closely matches Junayd's system, especially the fact that the state of confusion follows upon one's union with God. The point is not that one is at a loss about God. On the contrary, as a result of this meeting with God, one *knows* God with certainty. The resulting confusion is meant to indicate that one cannot put the experience into words. At times in the tale, Attar is dismissive of the mind and its ability to know God. But like Junayd, Attar is not calling his audience to the irrationality of fideism. Even if words are not sufficient to describe God, mystical experience (that is, what one sees in the spiritual state) has intelligible content, which Attar would seek to communicate in his many writings. Confusion here was not meant to undermine scholastic theology but to rebuild it on the sounder footing of spiritual insight.⁸²

The next figure, Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, came from Shiraz in today's Iran. He frequently refers to his confusion in his spiritual autobiography, *The Disclosure of Mysteries*, in which he recorded his visions of God.⁸³ Interestingly, references to a state of confusion follow God's appearance to him in apparently corporeal form. Baqlī is no anthropomorphist, but the term still carries something of the meaning with which Jahiz and Qasim used it against their anthropomorphist adversaries in the ninth century. Baqlī is aware that his sightings of God are theologically problematic, and for this reason he occasionally expresses his doubts about them. Did he really see what he saw? God reassures him, encouraging him not to doubt what he sees, especially God's

love for him as signaled by his appearance before Baqli. In echo of a canonical report that Muhammad saw his Lord in the most beautiful form, Baqli too is driven by a passion that he has for God and that God, he discovers, also has for him. This kind of passion, bringing together two lovers in mutual attraction, only makes sense in terms of beauty, and so, as Baqli notes, he, like the Prophet before him, sees God in the most beautiful form. He is attracted to God because of this extraordinary beauty of form by which God is manifest to him. Since the attraction is mutual, there must be something in Baqli that is beautiful to God, something reflecting the divine beauty that attracted Baqli to God. In short, at the core of his being there must be some divine spark, a mystery, to make God wild about him. All of this sounds rather unorthodox, and Baqli admits that many would accuse him of heresy, but he sees his experience as the pinnacle of monotheism where it is no longer simply a question of God—the Mighty and Majestic—mounted on his throne. Here, as with Junayd, monotheism means that nothing stands between Baqli and God. The throne of which the Qur'an speaks is now visible to the mind's eye. He mentions his confusion, but by now we know that this is his way of signaling that he cannot put into words the things he has seen. God comforts him, encouraging him not to worry about theological definitions. Several entries from Baqli's diary speak to the way he has adopted the concept of confusion as first articulated by Junayd, a concept that remains linked to the language of skepticism:

Allah then became manifest in another aspect, drawing utterly near to me, his feeble slave. He disappeared and then appeared in the essence of divinity from the world of eternity with the quality of oneness and singularity. I became confused [*tahayyartu*]. He then appeared to me before the throne clothed in splendor and beauty, and at the throne I saw a screen plaited with light, and from behind it he called to me, but it did not veil him. I saw him unveiled, and he said, "Ruzbihan, do not doubt what you have seen [*wa-lā tashukk fīmā ra'ayta*]. I am I, your Lord, the one and unique."⁸⁴

[...]

Allah said to me, "You will not truly comprehend divine oneness until you forget yourself and all else from the throne to earth." I remained confused [*mutahayyir*] in a great veil. He became manifest to me in the deserts of the spiritual world. He pointed to himself and said, "I am yours." Thereupon I went into ecstasies, and my heart was content.⁸⁵

[...]

I saw the prophets in the presence of Allah, may he be praised. I was seeking Allah modestly, in terms of his oneness and majestic attributes, and whenever wonders of the spiritual world would appear to me, I would reject them until I saw Allah, may he be praised, without knowing how [*bi-lā kayf*], in majesty and beauty. I then became confused [*tahayyartu*] at the eternity of Allah. Seeing him in the most beautiful

form, I remarked in my heart, “Whence did you fall from the world of divine oneness [*tawhīd*] to the station of ambiguous descriptions of God [*maqām al-mutashābihāt*]?” He came near to me, seizing my prayer carpet, and said, “Stand! What is this thought? You doubt [*tashukk*] me when I have represented myself in your eye so that you would be intimate with me and love me passionately?”⁸⁶

Finally, Ibn ‘Arabi, the renowned mystical philosopher of Andalusia, who travelled extensively in the Islamic East and is buried in Damascus, includes references to confusion (*hayra*) across his voluminous corpus of writings, including the two works for which he is most famous: *Bezels of Wisdom* and *Meccan Revelations*.⁸⁷ *Bezels of Wisdom* addresses the notion of “the perfect human being,” a concept that developed in spiritual and philosophical circles after the ninth century. Ibn ‘Arabi draws upon the idea to explain the ways in which God can be manifest in humanity through attributes that he shares with humans, such as generosity, wisdom, kindness, and so on. He refers to confusion in a discussion that recalls the controversy of anthropomorphism.⁸⁸ How can anything be like God? He alludes to scholars who lead people astray, confusing them with their talk of the varied aspects of the godhead. However, those who truly know God ask him to increase their confusion about him! The point is that God is beyond words, but Ibn ‘Arabi is also suggesting, in echo of what we have already seen, that clarity about God is to be gained from confusion.⁸⁹ This is confirmed in *Meccan Revelations*, a monumental work that integrates all branches of religious knowledge in Islam. It includes a small section on confusion with a title representing God’s words to Ibn ‘Arabi: “Confusion Brings You to Me.”⁹⁰ Here, too, allusion is made to the ambiguities of divine manifestation in human form. Confusion, Ibn ‘Arabi claims, is the greatest station for those familiar with the manifestation of God, but the forms in which they see God vary. He contrasts this to the speculation of scholars whose knowledge of God, he claims, is quite limited. However, for those who witness God, confusion is the epitome of divine guidance. Again, emphasis is laid on the cognitive value of the experience with the following statement: “the inability to grasp knowledge is a kind of knowledge” (*al-‘ajz ‘an dark al-idrāk idrāk*).⁹¹ Junayd could not have put it better.

Christians as source of confusion

Before closing this chapter, it is worth asking whether Jahiz was right. Were Christians the source of every confusion and ambiguity, at least in his own day if not in subsequent centuries when Islam was much more clearly the master over Christianity and Christians could not so boldly point out contradictions in its message? In his refutation of Christians, Jahiz calls them the most heretical, confused, and imbalanced of peoples.⁹² More than others, they are a source of trouble for Muslims as they happily point out

contradictions in the Qur'an and hadith.⁹³ They are a stubborn and obstinate people.⁹⁴ For Jahiz, Christians represent a great trial for Muslims, especially weak-minded ones who do not know how to respond to questions about ambiguous verses in the Qur'an. It is thus up to Jahiz, a leading public intellectual, to refute the beliefs of Christians, quelling the theological discord they stir up among Muslims. At the same time, under the influence of state officials seeking to claim religious authority for themselves, Jahiz uses the beliefs of Christians to discredit anthropomorphist views in Islam. He notes that Christians are divided like the stuffed heads of the umma.⁹⁵ Their beliefs, too, are anthropomorphist,⁹⁶ the result of a gross failure to understand the language of their own scriptures, just like Islam's anthropomorphists. If you are a Muslim with anthropomorphist beliefs, you are not better than a Christian. If Christians grasped the usages of words, they would find a credible interpretation of the apparently anthropomorphist passages in their scriptures.⁹⁷ The problem is not with scripture but with the minds of Christians—and those of anthropomorphist Muslims, too!

Muslims were certainly concerned about the challenge of Christianity and made great efforts to refute it.⁹⁸ But do we have evidence that Christians sought to stir up confusion among Muslims? Jahiz may have just been conjuring up a straw man to knock down, as a way to advance his own theological vision. It is difficult to know what actually happened between Christians and Muslims in ninth-century Baghdad. However, a text from this period records the proceedings of a debate that took place between a bishop, Theodore Abū Qurra (d. c. 830), and a group of Muslim scholars, in the presence of al-Ma'mun, the caliph who instituted the Inquisition and showed keen interest in theological issues. The caliph, who was making his way across Mesopotamia to wage jihad against the Byzantines, was encamped at that point with his entourage near Harran, where Abu Qurra was bishop, giving occasion for the debate.

It is Abu Qurra who records the debate, so it is naturally construed as a victory for Christianity.⁹⁹ It also depicts al-Ma'mun as the impartial overseer of the debate, suggesting that Christians would easily best Muslims in disputation if allowed to do so without fear of reprisal.¹⁰⁰ The many facets of the debate notwithstanding,¹⁰¹ our interest here is limited to the confusion it attributes to the scholars of Islam, the result of debating a Christian with theological expertise. Abu Qurra would compose a number of theological treatises,¹⁰² several of which show a close knowledge of Islam, especially the Qur'an. They also reveal a deep concern to defend Christianity against the claims of Islam. Politically, he had no problem with rule by Islam's caliphs and even composed a prayer for al-Ma'mun, asking God to protect him. In the debate, he refers to the caliph as "my lord and master, the commander of the faithful." It was not Islam's rule over Christians that troubled him but rather the hostile attitude of Muslims towards Christians, the result of the Muslim conclusion that the Qur'an depicts Christianity as a degraded religion.

The debate takes up sixteen points of Christian doctrine with a focus on belief in Jesus as the Word of God. This Christian belief is actually affirmed by the Qur'an (Q 4:171) even if Muslims understand it differently from Christians. Abu Qurra notes on a number of occasions that the Qur'an lauds Christians for their beliefs. It is clearly his impression that the Muslims read the Qur'an thinking it indicts Christianity as a form of polytheism. For this reason, throughout the debate, he bases his defense of Christianity on passages from the Qur'an. His goal is to show that Muslims who attack Christianity are actually at odds with their own scripture. It is a contradiction for Muslims to identify Christians with infidelity, polytheism, and idolatry when the Qur'an lauds them. The bishop's words reflect the anxiety of Christian communities in new circumstances. Even—or especially—when they prosper, they remain theologically deficient in the eyes of Muslims, making them a ready object of disdain. It is thus to strengthen the faith of Christians that Abu Qurra sets the debate down in writing. It is difficult to know to what extent we have a faithful record of the debate, but important for our purposes is the fact that it depicts Abu Qurra causing confusion among his Muslim opponents, reflecting something of the claims of Jahiz.

Abu Qurra, for example, responds to the Muslim position that Jesus is like Adam. God, the Qur'an says, created Jesus as he created Adam, by blowing his spirit into him.¹⁰³ Thus, Jesus is like Adam, a mere creature. Abu Qurra retorts that there is a difference. The Qur'an refers to Jesus as the Word of God whereas Adam has no such title. In echo of intra-Muslim discord over the status of the Qur'an, he asks how it could be said that the Word of God is created. Jesus, according to the Qur'an, is the Word of God, and the Word of God cannot be created. There are thus no grounds for calling Christians polytheists for believing in the divinity of Jesus. By claiming Christians are polytheists, Muslims deny their own scripture, making a liar of their prophet. Abu Qurra concludes by asking how Muslims can claim that Christians are polytheists when the Qur'an says on numerous occasions that it was revealed to confirm past scriptures, which Abu Qurra takes to mean the Psalms and Gospels. At this point, one of his Muslim opponents, a figure by the name of Muhammad Ibn 'Abdallah becomes pale, apparently stymied by Abu Qurra's eloquence.¹⁰⁴ When prodded by the caliph, he pleads that Christians have been around much longer than Muslims, making them better skilled at debate. He says, "My thinking is confused [*tahayyar*]. I have no response to him." This actually pleases the caliph, who praises Abu Qurra as a sea of knowledge to whom none can compare in theological acumen.

Abu Qurra continues by claiming that Muhammad wanted to make sure that his followers had no doubts about the goodness of Christians.¹⁰⁵ He backs this with the statement in the Qur'an (Q 49:14) that the Arabs of the desert, even if they have submitted to Muhammad as Muslims, are not truly believers. The verse thus refers to the Arabs of the desert as "Muslims" in contrast to "believers." Abu Qurra offers a different reading, claiming that "believers" actually refers to Christians. After all, elsewhere in the Qur'an, the

Arabs of the desert are depicted as infidels and hypocrites. How could they be the “Muslims” mentioned in this verse? The verse, he concludes, really speaks of Muslims in contrast to Christians. The latter are the true believers. Abu Qurra corroborates this by referring to verses in the Qur’an that speak of a well-guided people, whom he takes to be Christians. In such fashion, he undertakes a Christian reading of the Qur’an to show that the scripture of Islam itself offers evidence of the validity and even excellence of Christianity.

The debate then moves to the topic of Jesus as the Son of God.¹⁰⁶ One of the Muslim scholars in the caliph’s entourage says that this is the reason why Muslims call Christians polytheists. Once again, Abu Qurra responds on their terms:

You deny that your Lord might elect his word and spirit [terms used to describe Jesus in the Qur’an] and then honor and glorify him by naming him as a son to him. You call your prophet messenger of God, Abraham friend of God, and Moses addressee of God. What then prevents God from calling his word and spirit a son to him, since they are from him, just as you would not deny the son who is from you?¹⁰⁷

Abu Qurra, aware of the theological conundrums internal to Islam (that Jahiz and Qasim, as seen earlier, tried to resolve), says that God is not in heaven or earth and that one should also not think of Jesus as his son in a physically limited sense. Muslims, he says, believe they have certain knowledge of God but ignorantly conceive of his word and spirit in bodily terms.¹⁰⁸ Jesus is the word and spirit of God, as the Qur’an says, but such things, since they are from God, cannot be physically limited. His opponent thereupon surrenders, “My mind is confused [*tahayyar ‘aqlī*], and my knowledge has been used to humiliate me [*hānat ‘alayya ma‘rifatī*]. But I know that Jesus is like Adam even if I do not have the words to respond [*‘uyyiytu ‘an al-jawāb*].”

The debate then moves to the topic of the crucifixion of Jesus, a point denied by Muslims. They say that God raised Jesus to himself without allowing him to be killed by his adversaries.¹⁰⁹ Abu Qurra refers to Q 4:157, which states that “they did not kill Jesus but it only seemed so to them.” He then notes the verse in the Qur’an that says that God raised Jesus to himself. The conclusion to be drawn, he says, is that Jesus, God’s word and spirit as the Qur’an affirms, cannot be separated from him but is destined to return to him. Here, again, Abu Qurra draws a connection to intra-Muslim controversy, noting that Muslims say the same thing about the Qur’an as the speech of God. It is uncreated. Thus, just as it originated from God, so it will return to him.¹¹⁰ Do Muslims think that God does not have the power to make his word and spirit return to him, that is, rise after being put to death? His opponent then asks him about the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Did the Son of God, God’s word and spirit, not experience pain at the crucifixion? Abu Qurra likens the matter to sunrays on a wall. If the wall were destroyed, would the sun experience pain? One should not think of God’s word and spirit in physical terms. Abu Qurra,

using the words of the Qur'an for his own Christian purposes, cleverly plays upon a fear we saw in the writings of Jahiz, theological partisan of al-Ma'mun, namely, that Muslims stubbornly conceive of God in physical terms. He closes this portion of the debate by affirming the reason for the crucifixion. Christians would not have believed in the resurrection if the Word of God, Christ, had not been crucified prior to being raised. Here, his opponent, this time a Persian, says, "By God, Abu Qurra, you are right. My mind is confused [*hār 'aqlī*] and I do not know what to say in response to you."

In point after point, Abu Qurra's opponents concede defeat. Their inability to respond is repeatedly described as a state of confusion.¹¹¹ This does not mean that they have denied Islam, only that they find Abu Qurra's arguments compelling. But his arguments are at odds with the beliefs of Islam. As a result, they are trapped in a contradiction, seeing the sense of his position but still committed to their own. The claims of Christians and Muslims about Jesus cannot both be true. This makes them skeptics, unsure where truth lies, perplexed. Abu Qurra thus describes them as confused. The confusion here is not a suspension of judgment, a stage between acceptance and rejection on the way to certainty. It is more than that. Abu Qurra's opponents are confused because they do not know whether Christianity or Islam is in the right. They have become skeptics. In contrast, Abu Qurra is shown to be confident, sure of his position, a man of faith, skilled with words, rational in his thinking. He is no skeptic.

The debate silences the scholars of Islam. Abu Qurra has fended off all attacks on Christianity, leaving his opponents nonplussed. The caliph asks, "Is there anyone remaining to debate Abu Qurra?"¹¹² They beseech him, "Would the commander of the faithful graciously relieve us of the duty of debating Abu Qurra since we are not up to it." They then go off disgraced and confused (*mutaḥayyarīn*), while Abu Qurra is awarded a prize by the caliph. Whatever actually transpired in the debate, the record suggests that the concept of confusion was at play in inter-religious relations in the ninth century, and it was used to dismiss the arguments of one's opponents as a way to reassure oneself of one's own. Even if only a rhetorical strategy, it seems to have left its mark, making some Muslims wonder whether they had the theological wherewithal to claim certainty for Islam among the divergent beliefs within the umma. Disputation with Christians, combined with intra-Muslim controversy over anthropomorphist beliefs, created the impression of a community in confusion.

Conclusion

There was a good deal of theological wrangling in ninth-century Baghdad and its vicinity, much of it over the question of anthropomorphist beliefs. The controversy is particularly noticeable in the writings of Jahiz, a leading cultural figure of the period, not only in his theological treatises but also in his literary works. He was not the only scholar to be concerned about the implications of anthropomorphism for Islam. Others, such as Qasim, may not have

been as troubled by the political implications of anthropomorphist beliefs as Jahiz, servitor of caliphs, but he does connect it, like Jahiz, to challenges coming from Christians. Christians were threatened by Muslim assumptions that the Qur'an indicted Christianity as a kind of polytheism. They responded by pointing to ambiguities within Islam. Faced with anthropomorphist beliefs from within Islam and the theological strategies of Christians from without, Jahiz responded to both with a single strategy. At the heart of this strategy was a theory of language that combined the Qur'an's concept of clarity with ideas from Aristotle about the sociopolitical significance of speech. He used this theory as a weapon not only against stuff-headed Muslims but also Christians. Failing to grasp the correct usages of words, they ended by believing absurd things about God, posing a threat to social harmony and political stability. It was vital that he refute them both.

We are thus faced with a kind of skeptical confusion that goes beyond the domain of scholarly inquiry. The skepticism of scholarly inquiry is equally well known in other contexts. It denotes a temporary suspension of judgment when one is faced with two equally plausible but mutually contradictory arguments. Here, doubt is a spur to further reflection with the goal of reaching certainty, either for or against the position in question. However, in this chapter, we have seen another kind of skepticism, one that arose out of the specific circumstances of Islam in the ninth century. This skepticism implies a state of scholarly stasis, a breakdown in knowledge, where one is simply confused with no prospect of certainty. Christianity served Jahiz as a useful whipping post, but the true culprit was anthropomorphism in Islam. When subjected to rational analysis, anthropomorphist beliefs necessarily begot contradiction. Seeing the phenomenon of confusion as a threat not only to the beliefs of Islam but also to the ethical character of Muslim society, to say nothing of the political order, Jahiz expended much effort to counter and domesticate skeptical confusion in this sense, even when embracing it as a vital part of scholarly inquiry. Alas, his efforts and those of the caliphs he served ended in failure. The Inquisition was lifted during the reign of al-Mutawakkal (r. 847–61), the nephew of al-Ma'mun. This is not to say that the caliphs and their minions embraced anthropomorphist beliefs, but it did suggest that Ibn Hanbal and his followers had succeeded at least in earning for themselves a niche within the scholarly pantheon of Islam. As a result, Islam would take a very different direction from the one al-Ma'mun had tried to establish, one in which skeptical confusion, taking on definable contours in the ninth century, would persist as a source of perplexity over final claims to religious truth.

Notes

- 1 All sorts of questions were raised, many of which might seem absurd to us today, but this is the point of the skeptical dynamic in Islam's scholarly life. A belief should not be accepted without reservation if, when exposed to absurdity, it could not be convincingly defended. There was, then, some sense to begin a work on a skeptical note, a practice one notes already in the earliest days of theological

- reasoning in Islam. One treatise, for example, begins by considering the “absurd” question of whether God (in his absolute sovereignty) could have given his prophetic messengers the capacity *not* to convey the message that God had designated them to convey. See Josef van Ess, *Anfänge Muslimischer Theologie: Zwei Antiquarische Traktate aus dem Ersten Jahrhundert der Hīra* (Beirut: Franz Steiner 1977). The origins of theological reasoning in Islam remain obscure. For one proposal, see Josef van Ess, “Early Development of *Kalām*,” in G.H.A. Juynboll, ed., *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press 1982), pp. 109–23.
- 2 For the development of the theological discourse during the eighth and ninth centuries, see Richard M. Frank, *Early Islamic Theology: The Muʿtazilites and al-Ashʿarī*, vol. 2 (2007) in Dimitri Gutas, ed., *Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalām*, 3 vols. (Ashgate: Variorum 2005–2008).
 - 3 For one analysis of the controversy over the nature of God’s speech, see Josef van Ess, “Ibn Kullāb und die Miḥna,” *Oriens* 18/19 (1965/1966), pp. 92–142.
 - 4 al-Ṭabarī, *The Reunification of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate*, trans. C.E. Bosworth, vol. 32 in *The History of al-Tabarī* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1987), pp. 199–221.
 - 5 For only the latest analysis of the reign of al-Maʿmun, see Hayrettin Yücesoy, *Messianic Beliefs and Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press 2009).
 - 6 Wilferd Madelung, “The Origins of the Controversy Concerning the Creation of the Koran,” in J.M. Barral, ed., *Orientalia Hispanica* (Leiden: Brill 1974), pp. 504–25.
 - 7 Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Radd ‘alā al-Jahmiyya wa-l-Zanādiqa*, ed. Ṣabrī Ibn Salāma Shāhīn (Riyadh: Dār al-Thabāt li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī’ 2002).
 - 8 Wesley Williams, “Aspects of the Creed of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal: A Study of Anthropomorphism in Early Islamic Discourse,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 (2002), pp. 441–63.
 - 9 Sophia Vasalou, “Equal before the Law: The Evilness of Human and Divine Lies, ‘Abd al-Gabbār’s Rational Ethics,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 13 (2003), pp. 243–68.
 - 10 For one example, see Muḥammad Ibn Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *Khalq Afʿāl al-ʾIbād*, ed. Abū Muḥammad Sālim Ibn Aḥmad Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Salāfi and Abū Hājir Muḥammad al-Saʿīd Ibn Basyūnī al-Ibyānī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Turāth al-Islāmī 1984), p. 11 (no. 14).
 - 11 Sarah Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill 1999).
 - 12 Leonard Lirande, “Ibn Abī al-Dunyā: Certainty and Morality,” *Studia Islamica* 100/101 (2005), pp. 5–42.
 - 13 Suspicion of blind faith is a perennial issue in Islam. See, for example, Richard M. Frank, “Knowledge and Taqlīd: The Foundations of Religious Beliefs in Classical Ashʿarism,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109.1 (1989), pp. 37–62.
 - 14 Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsīd Society* (London: Routledge 1998).
 - 15 Richard M. Frank, “The Neoplatonism of Jahm ibn Ṣafwān,” *Le Muséon* 78 (1965), pp. 395–424.
 - 16 al-Dārimī, *al-Radd ‘alā l-Jahmiyya (Refutation of Jahmism)*, ed. Gösta Vitestam (Leiden: Brill 1960), p. 14.
 - 17 James E. Montgomery, “Al-Jāhiz’s *Kitāb al-Bayʾān wa al-Tabyīn*,” in Julia Bray, ed., *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam* (London 2006), pp. 91–152.
 - 18 On Ibn Hanbal and his followers in general, see Nimrod Hurvitz, *The Formation of Hanbalism: Piety into Power* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon 2002).
 - 19 See James E. Montgomery, “al-Jahiz,” in Michael Cooperson and Shawkat M. Toorawa, eds., *Arabic Literary Culture 500–925* (Detroit: Thomson Gale 2005), pp. 231–42. On the association of miserliness with unbelief, see p. 235.

- 20 al-Jāhiz, *al-Bukhalā'* (*The Misers*), ed. 'Abbās 'Abd al-Sātir (Beirut: Dār wa-Maktabat al-Hilāl 1993), p. 16.
- 21 al-Jāhiz, *Fī Nafy al-Tashbīh* (*On the Rejection of Anthropomorphism*), in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, 4 vols. in 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Jil 1991), vol. 1, pp. 279–309, especially pp. 284–86.
- 22 There is a likely connection between Jahiz's Mu'tazilite outlook and his insistence that language be used with compelling intelligibility. See Djamel E. Kouloughli, "L'influence Mu'tazilite sur la naissance et le développement de la rhétorique arabe," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 12 (2002), pp. 217–39.
- 23 al-Jāhiz, *Hujaj al-Nubūwa* (*Proofs of the Prophecy*), in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, vol. 3, pp. 221–81, p. 253.
- 24 Susanne Enderwitz, "Culture, History and Religion: À Propos the Introduction of the *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*," in Arnim Heinemann, John L. Meloy, Tarif Khalidi, eds., *Al-Jāhiz: A Muslim Humanist for our Time* (Beirut: Orient-Institut 2009), pp. 229–37. See p. 230.
- 25 al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* (*The Book of the Animals*), ed. 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, 7 vols., 2nd edition (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī), vol. 6, p. 35.
- 26 Ibid., vol. 6, pp. 36–37.
- 27 Ibid., vol. 7, p. 8.
- 28 Ibid., vol. 6, pp. 35–36.
- 29 Ibid., vol. 6, p. 36. The idea that confusion exists to spur people to certainty features in another treatise by Jahiz, *al-Masā'il wa-l-Jawābāt fī al-Ma'rifa* (*Questions and Responses Concerning Knowledge*), *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, vol. 4, pp. 45–65. In this work, the focus is opposing viewpoints. How does one know where truth lies? To respond to such skepticism, Jahiz develops a complex argument spelling out the need for a rational foregrounding to reading scripture. One thus has to have knowledge of the workings of the world to be able to read scripture. If you cannot understand the world with the mind (a prospect that requires it to have a rational order), then how could you hope to grasp the message of the Qur'an with the mind? The reference to confusion and doubt is on p. 60. Also, in *Hujaj al-Nubūwa*, in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, p. 247, Jahiz speaks of a group of skeptics who claim that doubt is obligatory in everything as a starting point for scholarly inquiry. He also speaks of doubt as a motive for certainty on p. 109 of *al-Awṣān wa-l-Buldān* (*Nations and Lands*), in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, vol. 4, pp. 107–47.
- 30 al-Jāhiz, *Tafḍīl al-Baṭn 'alā l-Zahr* (*Superiority of the Belly to the Back*), in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, vol. 4, pp. 153–66.
- 31 Ibid., vol. 4, p. 165.
- 32 Ibid., vol. 4, p. 157.
- 33 al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Tarbī' wa-l-Tadwīr* (*The Book of Squaring and Circling*), ed. Charles Pellat (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas 1955).
- 34 Ibid., p. 97, para. 189.
- 35 al-Jāhiz, *al-Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā* (*Refutation of Christians*), in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, vol. 3, pp. 301–51. Jahiz lists the Rafida among the classes of anthropomorphists on p. 351. It is also worth noting that a contemporary of Jahiz, the Zaydī scholar, al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm (d. 860), accused the Rafida of holding anthropomorphist beliefs. See Binyamin Abrahamov, "al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm's Theory of the Imamate," *Arabica* 34 (1987), pp. 80–105.
- 36 al-Jāhiz, *Fī al-Nābita* (*Concerning the Weeds*), in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, vol. 2, pp. 3–23. Jahiz associates the Rafida with the Nabita on p. 18.
- 37 al-Jāhiz, *Khalq al-Qur'ān* (*The Created Stature of the Qur'an*), in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, vol. 3, pp. 283–300. It is worth noting that Jahiz wrote this work, as he says (p. 285), to respond to the bouts of doubts (*mu'taliḡāt al-shukūk*) and the occurrences of ambiguities (*khawāṭir al-shubuhāt*) among Muslims.

- 38 al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Tarbi' wa-l-Tadwīr*, p. 35, para. 58.
- 39 Ibid., p. 26, para. 38.
- 40 al-Jāhiz, *Khalq al-Qur'ān*, in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, p. 293.
- 41 al-Jāhiz, *al-Radd 'alā al-Mushabbihā (Refutation of Anthropomorphists)*, in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, vol. 3, pp. 3–16.
- 42 Ibid., p. 7.
- 43 al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Tarbi' wa-l-Tadwīr*, pp. 12–13, para. 13.
- 44 Ibid., p. 16, para. 20; and pp. 52–53, para. 96.
- 45 Ibid., pp. 18–19, para. 25.
- 46 Ibid., pp. 25–26, para. 38.
- 47 Ibid., p. 6, para. 2.
- 48 Ibid., p. 35, para. 59.
- 49 Ibid., pp. 44–45, para. 81.
- 50 Ibid., p. 14, para. 16.
- 51 Jahiz makes this point in another treatise, *The Art of Speaking (Ṣinā'at al-Kalām)*, in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, vol. 4, pp. 241–50.
- 52 Jahiz makes this point in *al-Radd 'alā al-Mushabbihā* in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*. By thinking in corporeal terms, anthropomorphists invariably get trapped in confusing contradictions. For example, Jahiz refers to the way they read Q 89:22, “Your Lord has come with the angels in rows.” They speak about it in the following way (p. 13), “God does not come to the place in which he is.” Jahiz dwells upon this manner of theological reflection: “If it were permitted for God to come to the place where he is, it would be permitted for him to leave it and yet still be in it. If God reported that he is in heaven and earth, and you say that this world is not absent of him but that he is in it, [there is confusion] since this world has limits, and so whoever is in part of it or all of it is limited, since he would not pass beyond it. But if he did pass beyond it, he would leave it for a place, since it is only possible for him to leave from it for a place.”
- 53 Binyamin Abrahamov, “al-Ḳāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm’s Theory of the Imamate,” *Arabica* 34 (1987), pp. 80–105.
- 54 al-Qāsim, *Kitāb al-Mustarshid*, in *Majmū' Kutub wa-Rasā'il li-l-Imām al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm*, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm Aḥmad Jadabān, 2 vols. (Sana'a: Dār al-Ḥikma al-Yamāniyya 2001), vol. 1, pp. 443–96.
- 55 al-Qāsim, *al-Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*, in *Majmū' Kutub wa-Rasā'il li-l-Imām al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm*, vol. 1, pp. 387–442.
- 56 Ibid., p. 393.
- 57 Ibid., p. 400.
- 58 al-Qāsim, *Kitāb al-Mustarshid* in *Majmū' Kutub wa-Rasā'il li-l-Imām al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm*, pp. 445–46. In the following section of the book, which treats verses in the Qur'an that speak of God having a soul, causing some to think that God has a soul as humans do, Qasim begins with a similar formula (p. 451): “If a person in confusion [*ḥayra*] asks about the statement of Allah the Mighty and Majestic (Q 5:116): ‘You know what is in my soul, and I do not know what is in Your soul.’ And about the statement of Allah (Q 6:112): ‘God prescribed mercy for himself (lit. for his soul).’ If such a person imagines that Allah the Mighty and Majestic has a soul like the soul of the human being and that it is a part of a body and that it is a substance in which accidents subsist, it is said to him. ...” Qasim then goes on to explain the verses referring to God’s soul in order to dispel the confusion of the inquirer and show the theological respectability of Islam. For his approach to scripture, see Binyamin Abrahamov, *Anthropomorphism and the Interpretation of the Qur'an in the Theology of al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm* (Leiden: Brill 1996), especially pp. 30–43.
- 59 Another figure from this period, Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), also sought to dispel the idea of contradictions in scripture, especially in hadith. See Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl*

- Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth*, ed. Saʿīd Ibn Muḥammad al-Sinnārī (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth 2006). It is worth noting that Ibn Qutayba also connected the anthropomorphist controversy to skeptical confusion. See Ibn Qutayba, *al-Ikhtilāf fī l-Lafẓ wa-l-Radd ʿalā l-Jahmiyya wa-l-Mushabbiha* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya 1975), p. 49.
- 60 al-Qāsim, *Tafsīr al-ʿArsh wa-l-Kursī*, in *Majmūʿ Kutub wa-Rasāʾil li-l-Imām al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm*, vol. 1, pp. 655–85.
 - 61 *Ibid.*, p. 657.
 - 62 *Ibid.*, p. 661.
 - 63 *Ibid.*, p. 668.
 - 64 *Ibid.*, p. 670.
 - 65 *Ibid.*, p. 672.
 - 66 al-Qāsim, *al-Dalīl al-Kabīr*, in *Majmūʿ Kutub wa-Rasāʾil li-l-Imām al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm*, vol. 1, pp. 199–255. See also Binyamin Abrahamov, *Al-Qāsim B. Ibrāhīm on the Proof of God's Existence* (Leiden: Brill 1990), pp. 62–63.
 - 67 See al-Qāsim, *al-Dalīl al-Kabīr*, in *Majmūʿ Kutub wa-Rasāʾil li-l-Imām al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm*, p. 232; Abrahamov, *Proof of God's Existence*, pp. 142–43.
 - 68 The important role played by Junayd in the rise of mysticism in Islam is well known. See Christopher Melchert, “The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.,” *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996), pp. 51–70. The only point I would add to this insightful article is that in addition to promoting mysticism as a practice, Junayd also developed it as a scholastic system.
 - 69 al-Junayd, *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd*, ed. and trans. Ali Hassan Abdel-Kader (London: Luzac and Company 1962).
 - 70 On disputation in Islam in general, see Josef van Ess, “Disputationspraxis in der Islamischen Theologie. Eine Vorläufige Skizze,” *Revue des Études Islamiques* 44 (1976), pp. 24–60.
 - 71 al-Junayd, *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd*, p. 11 (Arabic), pp. 131–32 (English). I have chosen not to give the more literal translation of Abdel-Kader to convey the sense more faithfully.
 - 72 *Ibid.*, p. 45 (Arabic), p. 165 (English).
 - 73 *Ibid.*, p. 8 (Arabic), p. 128 (English), where it is translated as “bewildered.”
 - 74 Ahmet T. Karamustafa, “*Walāya* According to Junayd (d. 298/910),” in Todd Lawson, ed., *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism in Muslim Thought* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris 2005), pp. 64–70.
 - 75 Junayd has a treatise on the subject. See al-Junayd, *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd*, pp. 40–45 (Arabic), pp. 160–64 (English).
 - 76 *Ibid.*, pp. 55–57 (Arabic), pp. 176–78 (English).
 - 77 *Ibid.*, p. 23 (Arabic), p. 143 (English).
 - 78 For a collection of these reports from this period, see Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 892), *al-Awliyāʾ*, ed. Abū Hājir Muḥammad and al-Saʿīd Ibn Basyūnī Zaghālūl (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya 1993).
 - 79 al-Junayd, *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd*, pp. 51–52 (Arabic), pp. 171–72 (English).
 - 80 ʿAṭṭār, *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*, ed. Muḥammad Javvād Mashkūr (Tehran: Kitābfurūshī Tihārān 1968); *The Speech of the Birds*, trans. P.W. Avery (Cambridge, UK, Islamic Texts Society 1998).
 - 81 ʿAṭṭār, *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*, pp. 248–55; *The Speech of the Birds*, pp. 340–52.
 - 82 I differ to some extent with the one article on the topic: Lucian Stone, “Blessed Perplexity: The Topos of *Ḥayrat* in ʿAṭṭār’s *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*,” in Leonard Lewisohn and Christopher Shackle, eds., *ʿAṭṭār and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris 2006), pp. 95–111. Stone argues that the valley of confusion represents the abandonment of the intellect. Confusion becomes (p. 95) “the last rites for the faculty of reason ... the final vestige of the egoic self on the mystic’s quest.” The tale on the whole does

emphasize the problematic of the ego as the major obstacle to spiritual growth. Also, as Stone notes, confusion does serve as (p. 96) “refutation of the presumptuous and erroneous attempt to rationalize God.” But there is more to the story. It is unlikely that Attar would have made the connection that we might make today between mind and “egoic consciousness.” The point is not to move beyond rationality, as if the mystical experience had no intelligible content to it. Attar was no post-modernist. Rather, the point is to enrich it with deeper insight. In short, with Attar as with Junayd, confusion is part of a well-delineated scholastic system.

- 83 al-Baqlī, *The Unveiling of Secrets Kitāb Kashf al-Asrār: The Visionary Autobiography of Rūzbihān al-Baqlī*, ed. Firoozeh Papan-Matin (Leiden: Brill 2006).
- 84 Ibid., p. 21.
- 85 Ibid., p. 39.
- 86 Ibid., p. 58.
- 87 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam (Bezels of Wisdom)*, ed. Nawāf al-Jarrāh (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir 2005); and *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiya (Meccan Revelations)*, ed. Editorial Office, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-Islāmī). See also William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1989), especially the translations in chapters four and five.
- 88 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 37.
- 89 I differ to some extent with the one discussion on the topic: Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994), pp. 90–115. As Sells suggests, confusion signals what the mystics of Islam took to be the apophysis of God. However, the reference to confusion within a discussion that recalls the language of anthropomorphism sheds light on Ibn ‘Arabī’s specific usage of the term. One actually gains knowledge from the state of confusion, which by this time, as seen with Attar and Baqlī, is a particular station within the science of Sufism. As such, it might not be best described as apophysis. See also Michael Sells, “Bewildered Tongue: The Semantics of Mystical Union in Islam,” in Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn, eds., *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company 1989), pp. 87–124; and Diana Lobel, *A Sufi–Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya Ibn Paquda’s Duties of the Heart* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2007), pp. 35–50.
- 90 Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiya*, vol. 4, pp. 46–47.
- 91 Ibid., vol. 4, p. 46.
- 92 al-Jāhiz, *al-Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārā*, in *Rasā’il al-Jāhiz*, p. 315.
- 93 Ibid., p. 320.
- 94 Ibid., p. 316.
- 95 Ibid., p. 328.
- 96 Ibid., p. 330.
- 97 Ibid., p. 334.
- 98 David Thomas, *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology* (Leiden: Brill 2008).
- 99 Theodore Abū Qurra, *La discussion d’Abū Qurra avec les ulémas musulmans devant le calife al-Ma’mūn*, ed. Ignace Dick, 2nd edition (Aleppo: n.p. 2007). For the text of the debate, see pp. 69–131.
- 100 For a parallel, see Sidney H. Griffith, “Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bêt Hālê and a Muslim Emir,” *Hugoye Journal of Syriac Studies* 3.1 (2000).
- 101 Sidney H. Griffith, “The Monk in the Emir’s *Majlis*: Reflection on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period,” in Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, Mark R. Cohen, Sasson Somekh, eds., *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1999), pp. 13–65, especially pp. 38–48.

- 102 Abū Qurra, *Theodore Abū Qurra*, trans. John C. Lamoreaux (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press 2005).
- 103 Abū Qurra, *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, pp. 79–80.
- 104 Ibid., p. 80.
- 105 Ibid., p. 85.
- 106 Ibid., pp. 87–91.
- 107 Ibid., p. 87.
- 108 Ibid., p. 88.
- 109 Ibid., pp. 92–95.
- 110 Ibid., p. 94.
- 111 Ibid., pp. 99, 100, 102, and 117.
- 112 Ibid., p. 124.

2 A world without words

Difference of beliefs leads people to deny all truths.

‘Amiri (d. 992)

Baghdad beyond beliefs

Baghdad took on a varied hue in the tenth century. Theological wrangling, as seen in the last chapter, by no means disappeared, but now philosophy came to enjoy a prominent place among scholars attached to the courts of the day. Without philosophical expertise, especially knowledge of logic, you would not be taken seriously as a scholar. Philosophy not only brought prestige: It offered access to power. But there was a danger. It was not easy to earn a living by philosophy. One needed a wealthy benefactor, usually a member of the ruling class. The philosophically minded scholar may have scorned others who did not know how to back their beliefs with logic, but he, too, had to compete for the attention of the powerful. This made the scholarly world far from welcoming. It was elitist and riven by jealousy, backbiting, and intrigue. Still, at this moment in the history of Islam, philosophy emerged supreme when it came to establishing the truths of existence. Truth, here, was more a matter of clear thinking than clear speaking—more about logic than language. Theological dialectics only ended in disagreement whereas the logic of philosophy, it was thought, would yield surer knowledge of existence.¹

This can be seen in a celebrated debate from the year 933, not long after the unhappy reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908–32). The debate, which took place in Baghdad in the presence of Ibn al-Furāt, erstwhile vizier to al-Muqtadir, pitted Baghdad’s leading scholar of Aristotle, a Christian by the name of Mattā Abū Bishr (d. 939), against a rising scholar of grammar, Abū Sa‘īd al-Sirāfi (d. 979). Abu Bishr argued that truth is determined through concepts beyond words. Language is ultimately inconsequential for truth. One simply had to use the logic of Aristotle to arrive at conceptual truths beyond words. Abu Sa‘īd countered that you cannot have concepts without words. Truth is not the exclusive domain of those with knowledge of Greek and the philosophy of the Greeks. It is available to all who know how

to put words together meaningfully according to the rules of grammar. In other words, logic of a kind exists in all languages, not just the Greek of Aristotle. The record of the debate is skewed in favor of Abu Sa'īd over Abu Bishr, but it illustrates how seriously philosophy was taken at the highest echelons of power.²

The rise of philosophy had important consequences. It meant that logic, and the concepts and proofs it could engender, enjoyed pride of place over words and the way they could be skillfully deployed for sophistic purposes in theological disputation. It also meant that more credence was given to the mind than to the senses. The senses were vital since they served to collect data about the world, and words, too, were important since they served to describe truth. But truth itself lay neither in the data given to us by our senses nor in words, however persuasively conveyed, but in the power of the mind to grasp concepts beyond both senses and words. It was through logic—the mechanics of the mind—that truth was to be found, not through words or the interpretation of words or even through the witness of data obtained by our senses about the physical world. In this regard, from the ninth to the tenth century, a noticeable shift took place where more and more scholars turned to conceptual truths they discovered within themselves and the rational workings of the soul rather than relying on impressions the senses conveyed and the images words described. It was a scholarly world strikingly different in emphasis from the one in which Jahiz had moved in the previous century.

The philosophy of rule

This change was partly due to shifting political winds, which encouraged a measure of caution, even pessimism, towards worldly appearances. In Baghdad, rule was now in the hands of military commanders rather than caliphal successors of the Prophet. A dynasty known as the Buyids, which had risen out of the Iranian hinterlands and had no claim to prophetic lineage, had taken control of Baghdad in 945. They did not do away with the caliphate but chose instead to exploit its religious importance for their own ends, calling upon caliphs to invest them with power in carefully orchestrated ceremonies. They also sought to buttress their claims to rule by drawing upon ideas from the Persian heritage of kingship, styling themselves with the title of “king of kings,”³ and Persian was increasingly becoming the language of high culture alongside Arabic in the many courts that dotted the Abode of Islam.

The Buyids were Shi'a, but their beliefs were not a decisive factor in their rule. The tenth century had its share of strife between Islam's varied sects, but the Buyids were not driven by confessional politics. The larger issue was the heightened political fragmentation across the Abode of Islam. In addition to the Abbasids in Baghdad, now under Buyid dominion, there were two other caliphates. The Umayyads of Damascus, who had been overthrown in 750 by the Abbasids, had managed to retain power in Andalusia, and ruled from Cordoba. The Fatimids, who had emerged out of North Africa in the ninth

century, had founded Cairo as their capital. They posed a serious challenge to the Abbasid–Buyid condominium in Baghdad not so much militarily but more so through a far-reaching network of missionaries that spread theological ideas favorable to the political claims of the Fatimids.⁴ They claimed that the Fatimids were the rightful leaders of the umma as descendants and successors of ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, and, for Shi‘a, his designated successor. Alongside the three caliphates, a host of less well-known dynasties, from the Ḥamdānids in Mosul and Aleppo to the Sāmānids in Bukhara and Samarqand, competed for stature as claimants to rule in the Abode of Islam.

The fractious political climate of the day was a boon to philosophy. All rulers were Muslim, but they endorsed a variety of beliefs. This made the relation of beliefs to power ambiguous, encouraging scholars to look beyond the religious heritage to understand the nature of rule. Philosophy was the obvious place to search for answers. Caliphs in Baghdad had patronized the pursuit of philosophy since the eighth and ninth centuries. A scholar by the name of al-Kindī (d. c. 870), known as “the philosopher of the Arabs,” received caliphal support for his philosophical and scientific endeavors, which depended heavily on the translation of Greek material into Arabic.⁵ Nevertheless, the interest in philosophy in his day fell far short of the peaks it reached in the tenth century when Baghdad became the world center for the study of Aristotle, heir to Alexandria and, before it, Athens. It was around the study of Aristotle that scholars of different faiths gathered. Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians would join Muslims to discuss Aristotle’s ideas on logic, the origins of the world, and the fate of the soul after death. Great weight was given to the fact that Aristotle had been counselor to Alexander the Great. This impressed upon the rulers of this period the importance of philosophical guidance for the just and effective use of power.

At the same time, the relation between scholars and rulers was precarious. To consider only the eastern reaches of the Abode of Islam, in addition to Baghdad, the Buyids had important courts in Rayy and Shiraz, both in today’s Iran, and the Samanids had courts in what are now Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. Amidst this plethora of courts, various emirs patronized leading scholars and *littérateurs*. Having celebrated philosophers at court was a way to show that one ruled with wisdom, and poets were expected to compose verses praising the splendor of a ruler’s justice and the scope of his magnanimity. But for philosophically minded scholars, there was a hitch. You wandered from one court to another, hawking your scholarly wares, but you could not appear too ambitious. A philosopher was supposed to transcend worldliness. Philosophy was not simply a way to know truths even without the aid of God’s revealed message. The goal of philosophy was to enable its practitioners to transcend this physical realm for a metaphysical one.

In brief, the point of philosophy was to become godly. This meant that the philosopher should not be caught up in the worldliness of court life, and yet that was the very place the philosopher was supposed to be as wise counselor

to rulers. Alexander the Great had set the precedent by keeping Aristotle at his side, and what ruler did not want to be like Alexander the Great? Paradoxically, a scholar's worth was measured by his presence at court, where it was his task to dole out wise advice to rulers, enabling them to govern their realms with justice. And yet the nature of the philosopher's calling made it incumbent upon him to keep his mind fixed on the metaphysical realm above and beyond the ways of the world. As the mind guides the body but is not to succumb to its appetites and passions, so the philosopher lived a precarious existence between two realms: the physical and the metaphysical.

As the sage of society, the philosopher was to guide the hand of the ruler. It was not simply a question of pragmatic counsel. The ruler was to be educated in heavenly virtues. Such wisdom was to bestow a measure of legitimacy, especially on rulers with no prophetic lineage. But scholars, even philosophers, were happy to sell themselves to the highest bidder. It was not always for guidance in the ways of virtuous rule that scholars were compensated but perhaps more commonly for cleverly helping the ruler outshine his rivals by shaping the beliefs of Islam to suit his political agenda. The Brethren of Purity, a philosophically minded—and controversial—group of the tenth century, express a concern for politicized piety:

Differences arose among the people of a single religion over beliefs and doctrines due to differences in place, language, and the climate of their countries, and also because of the different views held by their leaders, teachers, and scholars who were interested in prestige in this world. There is a saying, "Be different and you'll be known." If the leading scholars did not disagree among themselves, they would not be able to assert their prestige over one another. Similarly, experts at debate and disputation invent many things about religion, things the messenger of Allah did not bring. They make things up, telling people, "This is the precedent set by the messenger." They make it sound nice and eventually even believe that what they have made up is true.⁶

Philosophy as arbiter of beliefs

The above passage underscores the sense of a real need for philosophical oversight of religious discourse. Philosophers in principle did not wrangle over words but were to transcend them for pure meanings discoverable through logic alone. The expectation that philosophers were to be detached from the ways of the world was not only meant to protect religious teachings from political agenda. There was also consensus that a scholar who was not properly detached from the world could not be said to have knowledge. There were two reasons behind this.

Firstly, worldly appearances, as noted above, could not be trusted. The senses easily deceive. The oar in the water looks bent, but our mind tells us it

is not. The sun appears no bigger than a plate, but our mind tells us it is not. Thus, logic—the mechanics of the mind—can be trusted more than our senses to inform us of the truth of a thing apart from our perception of it. The truth of a thing, it was held, lay not in its appearance to the senses but rather in the reason or purpose for which it was created. A thing is what it is not because of how it looks but because of what it is meant to do. A horse is a horse because it runs swiftly, and fire is fire because it burns. The purposes for which a thing exists could be known not by the senses but only by rational analysis—logic. The senses were useful for collecting information about the world, but it was the mechanics of the mind that disclosed the truths of things, that is, the purpose for which they exist. Indeed, since people had different impressions of the world, it was clear that reliance on senses alone invariably led to conflicting views about the nature of reality. Logic was the key to certainty.

Philosophers followed logic, a science meant to bring clear-headed inquiry into the true nature of appearances. The expectation that a single truth could be found beyond the multiplicity of sense impressions, including the multiplicity of religious beliefs, made it important for scholars to be wary of worldly appearances. One could know something with certainty only by logic, as indicated in the words of a little known but significant scholar of the period, Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī (d. 992):

It is impossible to decide the truth of matters that are disputed without the scale of logic, which is reliable for its justice and brings certainty. The art of logic is the intellectual tool by which the rational soul [that is, the human being] distinguishes between true and false in theoretical matters, between good and evil in ethical matters. Its place in souls that make use of it is like a straight standard by which knowledge is weighed in the balance. It is the control for question and answer, objection, contradiction, and deception [that is, the rhetorical techniques of theological disputation]. By it one resolves ambiguities and exposes distortions—and other matters related to the verification of allegations. It is also beneficial in terms of intellectual pleasure, which grows pure with its use, and also in taking satisfaction in knowledge, making the soul in itself a cause for the acquisition of wisdom [that is, philosophy], not to win the praise of others but to become contented in gaining truth by it and the spirit of certainty.⁷

There was a second reason that made it necessary for a scholar to be detached from the world. The senses could deceive, but so could the soul. A scholar could not be trusted if his mind was unduly influenced by self-interests or distracted by worldly pleasures. For the mind to achieve its purposes, it had to be free of desires and ambitions. The philosopher was to be solely occupied with the metaphysical realm, which is where truth, it was held, lay. If caught in the grips of the world, he would be unable to discover truth.

Attachment to the ways of the world kept one from thinking clearly. Detachment was the ideal. Since the truths of things were ultimately metaphysical, it was impossible to know them while immersed in the physical realm. A philosopher who sought to win the favor of the masses was a pseudo-philosopher, more interested in fame and fortune than truth. His mind had no mastery over his passions, making his words more rhetorical than truthful. The pseudo-philosopher (*mutafalsif*) might regale the unlearned with the names of Plato and Aristotle, Euclid and Ptolemy, but he was still a dissembler. If he understood the point of philosophy, he would act in a godly rather than beastly fashion, with no regard for his own glory. The Brethren of Purity capture the idea:

Whoever wants to know the realities of things should first search for the causes of all that exists and the reasons for which they were created. He should have a heart free of concern for worldly matters, a pure soul untouched by ignoble qualities, and a breast unimpaired by corrupt beliefs. He should not be a partisan of one school of thought against another since such fanaticism is based on mere whim, which blinds the mind's eye, blocking apprehension of realities and keeping the insightful soul from conceiving things in their true reality.⁸

Skeptical confusion reconfigured

Important for our purposes is the shift in thinking about the phenomenon of confusion. Scholars continued to connect the concept to the mutually contradictory positions of theological disputation, but it was no longer so singularly associated with anthropomorphist belief. Rather, in the tenth century, confusion was seen to be simply the result of living in this world. In the physical realm, truths, that is, concepts, were always adulterated by false usages of words, deceptive senses, and dishonest self-interests. This, in turn, gave rise to differences in language and to disagreement in custom, law, and belief. The singularity of truth could be found only in the metaphysical realm beyond words, senses, and self-interests. You were bound to be confused merely by having a physical body that by its nature kept you from giving your full attention to the metaphysical realm, as 'Amiri explains:

If the mind is not isolated from the senses, the body will distract it from its role of discerning the truth of things, turning it to other things we share with the animals. The body will keep the mind from knowing the true meanings of things, meanings that raise us above the physical world. {...} If one is captured by doubt [*mirya*] about the teachings of religion, he is to take recourse to the arts of logic. {...} It is obvious that the divine religion, with its revealed teachings, has the purpose of liberating the mind [literally, the rational soul] from its captivity to the body. {...}

But when the rational soul fails to make praiseworthy choices for its desires, allowing place for bodily urges in the process of searching for its true purposes, it becomes subject to confusion [*hayra*]. {...} When the rational soul is not enslaved to bodily pleasures, it will be secure from confusion [*hayra*]. {...} But those who look on wisdom disparagingly, eager for wealth and stature in society, deserve to be among those who exist wretchedly in a state of confusion [*hayra*].⁹

Despite the great confidence placed in philosophy, it is important to emphasize that unlike today it did not stand on its own apart from theology. Rather, there was a tendency during this period to look to philosophy to rescue theology from the morass of discordant beliefs plaguing the umma. To be sure, not all scholars held this view. Some felt it was better to keep beliefs apart from philosophical speculation, claiming that beliefs served to bring us closer to God, whereas philosophical speculation was meant to help us comprehend the cosmos. Combining the two would only confuse the matter.¹⁰ Still, many a scholar looked to philosophy for salvation. They did not discard religion but sought a way to come to terms with the reality of competing beliefs in the physical realm while still aspiring to discover the singularity of truth in the metaphysical realm, where concepts mattered more than words and where beliefs could be adjudicated only by virtue of the impartiality of logic. Philosophy, then, was to be the antidote to the theological illness of the day. This illness, skepticism, was the result of living in a world with a myriad of competing beliefs. Indeed, if one hoped to find truth in this world, one would run the risk of abandoning religion altogether, as the Brethren of Purity warn their readers:

The reason they leave religion altogether is that they use reason to analyze the existence of disagreement among religions. They conclude that everyone's religion is defective according to the people of other religions. They do not find a confession or religion without [alleged] defects and so they abandon religion entirely without recognizing that to be rational and not have a religion is the greatest of all defects.¹¹

The challenge was to find a way to accommodate the fundamental causes of skepticism, namely, the diversity of competing beliefs intrinsic to the fabric of the physical realm, without discarding religious truth altogether. Scholars were painfully aware of the tension between what the mind affirmed as logical and what scripture proclaimed in its literal wordings, but there was also a sense that philosophy and religion worked in tandem to refine souls, freeing them from their baser impulses in preparation for a future life in a realm beyond this one.

Philosophy was therefore not a self-standing discipline. Rather, scholars looked to philosophical categories to build a surer foundation for theological claims. Instead of appealing to the miracles of the Prophet or overcoming

one's opponent in debate, scholars now turned to logically demonstrable proofs to verify beliefs—everything from the origins of the world to the fate of the soul after death. It is thus in this period that the beginnings of philosophical theology in Islam can be found.¹²

One thing above all brought about this shift towards a more philosophically grounded approach to the beliefs of Islam: Skepticism, that is, the recognition of the existence of arguments that were equally compelling but mutually incompatible. Was the world created or was it eternal? It could not be both. This particular question was hotly debated since so much of one's beliefs hung on the answer. Other questions were no less controversial: Would the body rise one day to rejoin the soul in the afterlife or was it only the soul that returned to God after parting ways with the body at death? Did religions other than Islam have worth? Other peoples of the Abode of Islam—Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians—seemed to live well. Did this make their religions equal to Islam? If so, what, if anything, was unique about Islam?

The religious plurality that existed within and beyond the boundaries of Baghdad led some to conclude that it was impossible to determine religious truth at all. Each religion had its arguments. Each could be defended. But they could not all be true. Anthropomorphism, even if it had not disappeared as a point of dispute, was no longer the most urgent question.¹³ The conundrum that loomed large in the tenth century was the uniqueness of Islam. Why was its way of life true, and those of other religions false? A clever usage of words in debate made one religion seem as compelling as the next. Clearly, then, true beliefs lay beyond words. As a result, the apparent realities of Islam—its scriptures, traditions, doctrines, and laws—had to be reconsidered in the light of philosophy. This was a precarious task that could lead to confusion and doubts.¹⁴ Were religious teachings to be subordinate to philosophy? The Brethren of Purity would reject the idea that shari'a had been given merely to regulate bodily functions in this world—ritual ablutions of the body before prayers and its ritual cleansing after urination, defecation, menstruation, and the like. Religion in their view could not be reduced to such things. It had to have a higher purpose, namely, to draw the attention of people to a world beyond bodily functions.¹⁵ The goal of religion, then, was not about appearances—scriptures, traditions, doctrines, and laws—but the mysteries to which they might point yet that still lay beyond them. In other words, the apparent realities of religion were not true in themselves. If religion were simply about the literal wordings of scripture, a thinking person would inevitably become confused, as the Brethren of Purity note:

We have treated numerous theological questions: the creation of the world after it was non-existent; the downfall of the soul; the creation of Adam and the cause of his disobedience; the prostration of the angels before Adam; the story of the devil and his refusal to prostrate before Adam; the tree of eternity; the reason for the pact that Allah made with the offspring of Adam; the reports of the resurrection when the horn will

be blown, souls will be raised, judged, and made to traverse the path above the fires of hell before entering paradise and visiting the Lord the Blessed and Exalted. What are the true meanings of these things? Among people are a folk who, although using the mind to make distinctions, are pseudo-philosophers. They reflect upon these things [enumerated above], but their minds, by which they measure them, are unable to conceive their true meanings. They take them according to what is indicated by the apparent wordings of revelation [*zāhir alfāz al-tanzīlāt*], which their minds do not accept. They therefore fall into doubts [*shukūk*] and confusion [*hayra*]. If confusion persists, they end by denying these things in their hearts even if they cannot declare so publicly out of fear of the sword.¹⁶

Skepticism defined

The impasse was known as “the equivalence of evidence” (*takāfu’ al-adilla*), a notion that undermined the very idea of religious truth. Jews, Christians, and Muslims, among others, all had their understanding of God. They all had their forms of prayer. They all had moral expectations of community members. On what basis could it be said that one community’s way of life led to happiness in this world and the next whereas others did not? Yet, to accept the truth of religious differences is to deny all truths, as asserted by ‘Amiri in the epigraph of this chapter. Truth has to be discernible in the world, and so he rails against those who fail to make the effort to look beyond contradictions, only to end by foregoing all truths:

Those who deny all truths, both those of the senses and those of the mind, are furthest from the group with the truth and are known for their obstinacy [*‘inād*] and sophistry [*safsafa*]. The reason for their ignorance and this deficiency is the many disagreements among those who dispute over theoretical meanings; and the many disagreements among those skilled in the science of prophetic traditions over the transmission of prophetic sayings. That is, they [the deniers of truth] come across many issues where two groups are in mutual opposition over a meaning. But they do not have the strength to probe these contradictions and test them to separate the sound from the unsound, judging all of them to be inherently marked by mutual contradiction.¹⁷

The towering scholars of the day had to account for the manifest existence of communal diversity within the Abode of Islam, and seek to explain it within a framework that more or less affirmed the superiority of Islam.¹⁸ But there were others who nearly made skepticism into a school of sorts, that is, a creed of its own. We find indications of this as early as the ninth century: A figure known as al-Nazzam, who featured in the last chapter as one of the teachers of Jahiz, had identified with those believing in the equivalence of evidence prior to his affiliation with Mu’tazilism.¹⁹ (Study of the techniques of skeptical argumentation by scholars aligned with Mu’tazilism—or Ash‘arism—is beyond the scope

of this study.) For those belonging to this “school,” it was reasonable to hold—almost as a creed—and even demonstrable that religious truth could not be determined with certainty.

The idea of equally convincing but mutually contradictory positions was cause for alarm in pious circles across the umma. Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), a celebrated scholar of Andalusia, devotes a whole chapter to it in his compendium on heresies in Islam and other religions.²⁰ He divides those who adhere to the equivalence of evidence into three groups. The first maintains that the equivalence of evidence applies to all points of disagreement. They neither affirm nor deny the truth of God, the eternity or creation of the world, the validity or invalidity of prophecy, or one religion over another. They hold that religious truth exists but that it is impossible to say where it lies. The second group limits the equivalence of evidence to everything except the existence of the creator. That there is a creator is beyond doubt, but they reserve judgment on all other religious matters. The third and final group further restricts the domain of skepticism. They affirm the existence of the creator and the truth of Islam but are perplexed by its theological diversity. They hold that one of the sects of Islam represents the truth but that it is impossible to determine which one. Interestingly, at one point in this chapter, Ibn Hazm refers to confusion. He does not mean the suspension of judgment vital for scholarly inquiry but rather the skeptical confusion that results from irresolvable perplexity, which, as will be recalled from the last chapter, Jahiz saw as the inevitable result of anthropomorphist beliefs. Here, it indicates simply a commitment to ignorance:

A group adheres to confusion [*ḥayra*], saying, “We do not know what we believe. We are not able to accept a creed that is not exclusively correct. If we did, we would deceive ourselves and renounce our minds [since other creeds also appear correct], so we neither deny nor affirm anything.” The majority of this group has a propensity for worldly pleasures and bodily lusts, as their natures are so inclined.²¹

Did such a group actually exist? It is a long-standing scholarly technique in religious circles to exaggerate if not actually concoct doubts about religious truth in order to dispel them, thereby demonstrating the rationality of religion. However, the idea of the equivalence of evidence did not only attract the attention of scholars like Ibn Hazm in Andalusia on the border with Christian Europe: It also attracted attention in Baghdad. It features notably in the writings of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 1023), a keen observer of society. As much *littérateur* as philosopher, Tawhidi frequented the varied courts in today’s Iraq and Iran in search of patronage. His own piety was decidedly mystical in character, reflecting the religious temperament of the times. As a skilled essayist, he used his pen to poke fun at scholars who spoke to no end about religious matters but never reached any conclusions. In his view, theological debate was poison for the umma, resulting in nothing but religious discord. Thus, his references to the equivalence of evidence are

partly meant as a parody of theology, a profession he deeply detested. Still, the phenomenon actually existed. It echoes across the scholarly writings of the day. Tawhidi himself said as much in a conversation with Ibn Sa'dān (d. 985), a vizier in the service of the Buyid dynasty who sought Tawhidi's counsel, including information on courtly intrigue. Tawhidi refers to his teacher's conclusion that the existence of contradictory but equally convincing beliefs is simply part and parcel of the human condition, without, however, impugning the singularity of truth brought by the prophets:

The wide variety of beliefs even within a single religion lies in the fact that beliefs are the product of people's opinions, which have their origin in the mind. Since some are clearheaded and others muddled in their thinking, people are going to be divided over religious teachings despite the fact that the source of religion—prophets—cannot be accused of falsehood. Add to that the fact that people are not the same in character. Most are of such bad character that their baser motives rule over their minds. If they were free of their sordid impulses, their minds might stand a chance of knowing the truth in all its veracity, but only very few rise above their own whims.²²

If, then, the equivalence of evidence is a constitutive element of the human condition, why not accept it as worthy of belief in its own right—as one's creed? This was the skepticism, a school in the making, from which the philosophically minded scholars of the day hoped to rescue Islam. It apparently attracted a number of adherents, at least enough to be worthy of occasional mention in the sources from the period.²³ Tawhidi relates the position of one of them as narrated to him by his own teacher, a famed logician by the name of Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī (d. c. 1000). Abu Sulayman recounted to him how this skeptic, whom he names simply as one of the confused from Sijistan, a region in southeastern Iran, was asked about his espousal of the equivalence of evidence as his creed. The fellow responds by relating how in the past he had passionately defended a set of beliefs. However, he began to notice that he would have the upper hand in the argument one day only to be bested by his opponent the next day. He concluded from this that he could no longer honestly judge a belief to be correct simply because it was backed by argument: The argument used to support it would invariably be turned against it. He had also read the scriptures and teachings of the various communities but he did not find one better than another. It did not make sense to him to say that they were all true. How could they be, teaching things that were mutually contradictory? Still, he found satisfaction in seeing all as equally plausible even if none could be determined to be singularly true. This, however, had not led him to abandon religion, as he explains:

My own religion is inviolable because I was born and raised in it. I have absorbed its sweetness and am familiar with the ways of its people. I am

like a man who enters a caravanserai to seek cover from the heat of the sun. He takes the room given to him without question. While asleep, a cloud takes shape and sends down buckets of rain, and his room begins to leak on all sides. Looking across the courtyard, he sees all the other rooms in the same condition. He also sees how muddy the courtyard has become and concludes that the best thing to do is to stay in his room, leak and all, rather than splatter his legs in the muck of the courtyard. Yes, like him, it is best for me to stay where I am. I was born with a blank mind. My parents introduced me to this religion without discussion, and when I examined it, I found it to be much like other religions. It is dearer to me to keep it than abandon it. I would only make the choice to leave it for another that offered a more convincing argument for its truths, but I have not found such a one, and so I stick with what the years have made familiar to me.²⁴

Confusion in this sense can actually offer a peace of mind that eludes those who spend their lives arguing for one religion over another. Some, then, espoused the equivalence of evidence as the best way to explain a world that by its nature is bound to disagree. However, a group that Tawhidi calls clever theologians did not stop there. Instead of being satisfied by suspending judgment about religious truth, they dismissed religious beliefs as a bundle of irresolvable absurdities. In contrast, Tawhidi, a pious Muslim, looked to philosophy and even more so to mystical insight as ways out of the debacle. But he *did* agree with the so-called clever theologians that the endless contradictions of theology made the beliefs of Islam appear farcical.

For example, dispute over human freewill led to no satisfactory outcome, only absurdity. The thinking runs as follows: If God knows all things, even before they happen, is it not stupid of him to summon unbelievers to obey his commands when he knows in advance that they will persist in unbelief? Is God stupid? The fact that he knows all things in advance means that all things are also determined in advance. What, then, is to be made of actions contrary to his commands? Does that make God the author of evil no less than of good? Or has he determined in advance that some will go to hell, and others to paradise? If so, where is the justice in that? The questions only got more absurd the longer the debate went on. Tawhidi thus had very good reasons to give voice to a skeptic who claims that the beliefs of Islam necessarily lead one to conclude that God is unjust. Tawhidi is not advocating this view, nor is the skeptic. He only wants a logical explanation of the matter:

If Allah is just, generous, magnanimous, all-knowing, compassionate, and merciful, he would have destined his entire creation for paradise for the following reason: Despite their disagreement in belief, they all exert effort to please him and to avoid displeasing him in accordance with their knowledge and intellectual capacity. They only fail to follow his commands when deceived by their own ignorance. Consider a man who goes

to take a gift to the ruler but along the way is tricked into handing it over to a conniving bunch of men who convince him that one of them is the ruler. Would not the real ruler, out of the generosity expected of his station, excuse him of this error and not punish him?²⁵

The skeptics whose views echo Tawhidi's disdain for theological disputation did not have doubts about the existence of truth in itself. For them, the problem was the impossibility of knowing which religion could be said to represent it. As they saw it, religious knowledge lay in the realm of possibility, not necessity. This should not be confused with the thinking within shari'a circles that we might not be completely certain of all aspects of our religious duties (such as the direction of Mecca when praying) but that acting on a supposition (*ẓann*) does not invalidate them. Here, the stakes were much higher. Was religion to have the status of binding knowledge at all? Scholars of the day made a distinction between necessary as opposed to possible knowledge. For example, knowledge that the whole is greater than any of its parts or that ten is great than three is a necessary truth no one denies. Some things could be known as necessarily true (*ḍarūra* or *wujūb*) or necessarily false (*imtinā'*). But how could this apply to religion since there was more than one? Religion could be Judaism. It could be Christianity. It could be Islam. It could be Zoroastrianism. Religion fell into the realm of the possible (*jawāz*). It was not logically necessary that religion be this or that. Skeptics who espoused the equivalence of evidence were willing to accept as true and false what was clearly true and clearly false, but they refrained from making any conclusion about a matter where true and false were not clearly distinguishable. Can we ever know for certain whether the world is created or eternal? If not, why expend so much effort thinking about it when the result will only be greater confusion?

Tawhidi was in sympathy with the skeptics, but as a mystically minded philosopher, he believed answers were to be found if one looked for the truths of existence beyond words. Although a master of prose, Tawhidi recognized the limitations of words. Words can easily lead to absurdities. For example, what can we say with certainty about the source of evil? Many believed that God was the creator of all things, but this implied that he also created evil—a troubling possibility. However, if one said that God did not create evil, this would suggest that there was a creator other than God. This method of speaking had place in theological disputation, prompting Tawhidi to parody its absurdness in the following vignette:

A man from Persia went on the pilgrimage to Mecca. Clinging to the curtains of the Ka'ba, he invoked Allah, saying, "You who have created the vicious beasts and creeping vermin and set them on people, and struck them with chronic disease, blindness, and poverty." At this point, his fellow pilgrims pounced on him to stop him from such blasphemy, saying, "Invoke Allah with beautiful names." He returned to the Ka'ba, clinging

to its curtains, calling out, “You who have not created the vicious beasts and creeping vermin and have not set them on people and have not struck them with pain and illness.” They once again pounced on him, saying, “Do not say this. Allah is the creator of everything.” Fed up with them, he said, “I do not know what to do. If I say that Allah is the creator of these things, you pounce on me, and if I say Allah is not the creator of these things, you pounce on me.”²⁶

The problem, Tawhidi recognized, is that words lead to paralysis: the equivalence of evidence. Words could direct you to the truths of existence, but the truths of existence could not be staked on words. If one was sufficiently clever with words, anything could be said, and any position defended. A surer method was needed to reach certainty about religious matters. The art of disputation required scholars to expose contradictions in the arguments of their opponents, producing a mountain of mutually contradictory but equally compelling arguments. The problem lay in the confessional partisanship of scholars. Not all of them argued for the truth but only for the positions of their own sect. At one place in Tawhidi’s writings, in words attributed to his teacher, Abu Sulayman, the confessional partisanship of scholars is named as the source of theological confusion (*ḥayra*). It is thus fanaticism for their own sect that keeps scholars from the state of godly transcendence, that is, impartiality, needed to know the truth of things. They end by becoming trapped in the equivalence of evidence (*takāfu’ al-adilla*). The passage is important because it suggests that skepticism, the equivalence of evidence, which is here closely associated with confusion, results from the inability of scholars to transcend their own attachments.²⁷ It is thus by representing the views of skeptics that Tawhidi launches a total assault on the art of speaking that formed the rules of theological disputation. It is, ironically, theology that leads scholars to skeptical reservations about the location of religious truth as signaled by the equivalence of evidence. For example, in the same work, Tawhidi refers to controversy over the next world. Would we experience bodily pleasures in paradise, compensation, as scripture says, for pleasures foregone on earth? If so, one might wonder whether such pleasures could become monotonous over the course of eternity? Below, a clever theologian says that it is absurd to think that people in paradise perpetually pursue bodily pleasures. This leads him to greater confidence in the truth of skepticism:

A theologian remarked, “How strange is the situation for the inhabitants of the garden [paradise].” He was asked: “How so?” He responded, “They remain there forever with nothing to do except eat, drink, and engage in sex. Does this not exasperate them? Do they not grow weary of it? Do they not deem themselves above such endeavors that animals also pursue? Do they not disdain it? Are they not fed up with it?” He proudly began to promulgate this and its likes. He adhered to the school

[*madhhab*] of the equivalence of evidence and accepted the challenges of all who would debate him on the matter.²⁸

This kind of thinking, undermining the merits of religious reasoning as a whole, prompts Tawhidi into a tirade, not against skepticism but against the skewed theological discourse that fosters it. After berating the discipline in every way possible, he records the response of his teacher, Abu Sulayman, who attributes the phenomenon to the tendency of some to conceive of religion as they conceive of things they know in the physical world through the senses. Tawhidi says:

By my life, whoever hopes to find tranquility of soul, certainty of heart, and ease of mind in the ways of the people of theological dispute will be afflicted by this calamity and surrounded by this misery. The art of speaking [that is, theology] is entirely dispute, defense, artifice, delusion, obfuscation, distortion, sophistry, ornamentation, wiliness, dissemblance, a peel without a kernel, a land without yield, a path with no light, a prop without platform, leaves without fruit. The novice in it is stupid, the initiate a skeptic, and the adept religiously suspect. On the whole, it is greatly deficient and of little benefit. I reported this matter [the skeptic's discussion of pleasure in paradise] to Abu Sulayman, who said, "He has been overcome [in his thinking] as a result of physical sense and nothing else. All that is presumed or observed by the senses eventually brings about boredom and weariness, leading to exasperation, ennui, and a feeling of being limited. This is obvious as known in the case of beings endowed with senses. The matter is not like that regarding the hereafter. There, the intellect holds sway, and the intellect is not afflicted by boredom, struck by discomfort, or touched by fatigue."²⁹

It is important to bear in mind that the skepticism under discussion here was not the obsession of a single figure. It cuts across much of the writings of the day. Indeed, the idea that all religions are essentially the same posed a threat to a political order founded upon a divine mandate. A scholar from a slightly later period, al-Māwardī (d. 1058), a counselor to Abbasid caliphs, puts it this way:

The people of one religion might differ across varied schools and divergent beliefs. The result when those of a single religion differ is hostility and division, as occurs among those who differ between religions. The reason is that religion, when there is agreement in one creed, is among the strongest causes of concord while disagreement over it is among the strongest causes of division. If the people of different religions and opposing schools are all seen as the same [*takāfa' ahl al-adyān al-mukhtalifa wa-l-madhāhib al-mutabāyina*], and one of the two groups does not have the upper hand or greater numbers, the hostility between them will

be stronger and the feuds among them greater, for mutual envy among equals and competition among peers only aggravate the enmity of difference.³⁰

It is true that “heretics” in all periods could be seen as a political threat. Legitimate rule in Islam has often been linked to a particular set of beliefs, and opposition to a dynasty has often crystallized in so-called heretical circles. The revolution that overthrew the Umayyads, for example, took shape around the claims of the Abbasids to be the true leaders of the umma as recipients of God’s favor. Scholars of the time recognized the relation between political stability and theological concord, but they were no less interested in the way political ambitions gave rise to theological discord. The Brethren of Purity, for example, occasionally expressed their disdain for such a politicization of beliefs. In their view, as noted earlier, it had been political ambition as much as theological disputation that had led to the breakdown of the singularity of beliefs that had existed at the time of the Prophet, the result of scholars shaping beliefs to suit the agenda of the rulers they served.³¹

The Brethren of Purity: one response to skepticism

The group known as the Brethren of Purity remains something of a mystery.³² They were a confraternity devoted to the spiritual life and their writings display a wide-ranging interest in all branches of the knowledge of the day from mathematics and engineering to astronomy, medicine, and law. Their treatises, which numbered fifty-two and were collected in a quasi-encyclopedia, show affinity with the writings of Isma‘ilism, the branch of Islam associated with the Fatimid dynasty in Cairo. But the nature of the relation between the Brethren of Purity and the Fatimids remains unclear. It is worth emphasizing that scholars affiliated with Isma‘ilism during this period represent a diverse theological outlook. What can be said is this: The Brethren of Purity, a small coterie of philosophically minded scholars, who were bent on winning over others to their outlook, very much represent the philosophical character of the age. Moreover, despite their small number, they left a huge mark on the scholarly heritage of Islam. Above all, they were keenly sensitive to the need to address what seemed to be the irresolvable differences dividing the umma.

The writings of the Brethren of Purity address a plethora of specific problems, from mathematics to law, but the overarching issue is the need to address reasons for disagreement among people. How could truth be found when beliefs within Islam differed so markedly? The underlying motive behind their writings is a desire to come to terms with the phenomenon of the equivalence of evidence. The need to accommodate irresolvable differences within the sphere of religious truth makes their thinking quasi-relativist. Islam is given a certain preference among religions, Arabic among languages, but only in principle. The point is that all religious communities, including the community of Islam, are prone to division and disagreement simply by virtue

of existing in the physical realm. The things of this world, including the things of religion, cannot be said to be true in their appearances since such things are subject to the vagaries of worldly existence no less than anything else. In the same way that humanity is divided into tribes and clans, and the animal kingdom is divided into genus and species, religions, too, are divided in their creeds, customs, and laws. Conflicting confessions are found not only across religions, but they also exist within a single religion. And yet religion still has to be one if it is to be true.³³ Thus, for the Brethren of Purity, all religions work in much the same way: All religions are subject to corruption, as all things in the physical realm, but it is still religion alone that enables people to transcend the physical realm, to refine their souls in preparation for their final destiny in the metaphysical realm. All religions, in the view of the Brethren of Purity, could accomplish this purpose. Normally, in Islam, it is only the language of the Qur'an that effectively puts you on the path to God. Other religions, while not necessarily bad, have deviated from their true origin and thus cannot accurately point you in the direction of God. In contrast, the Brethren of Purity set out a framework in which all religions have a stake in true religion. Indeed, in their view, the peoples of all religions will meet in paradise.³⁴

This openness to religious pluralism actually follows from a theory of language. According to the Brethren of Purity, language, including the words of scripture, is not divine but simply part of a physical realm, making it subject to corruption. What is subject to corruption cannot be divine. (To sidestep the conundrum over the status of the Qur'an as God's speech, the Brethren of Purity maintained that it was both created and uncreated: created in its existence in this world and uncreated in its existence in the other world.)³⁵ God, then, was beyond words, even the words of scripture, even if it was the role of scripture, all scripture, to point you in the right direction. How did this work? The Brethren of Purity, like other philosophically minded scholars, posited a potential resemblance between the things of the physical realm and the things of the metaphysical realm. In short, humans could aspire to be like angels. Truth was metaphysical (angelic), but its resemblance existed in the physical (human) realm, at least in potential. But this resemblance of the physical to the metaphysical could not be grasped through words, however eloquent, but only through intelligible concepts. The mind, not the ear, was the vital organ for understanding the metaphysical truth of a thing. To be sure, language was necessary to represent and communicate truth in the physical realm, but it was the mind that determined the true meanings of words by grasping the concepts to which they point. One was to hear scripture only to move beyond its wordings to its mysteries, which the pure-souled could grasp by means of logic. If you thought that true ideas could be found in words without rational analysis, you were destined for a wretched existence plagued by doubt and confusion. For the Brethren of Purity, the metaphysical realm, where logic prevailed over words, offered perfect theological concord. Words were to be construed not literally but logically, in order to discover the intelligible concepts, the truths, to which they pointed. Concepts belonged to the metaphysical

realm, making them free of the differences and disagreement intrinsic to the physical world—and thus free of doubt and confusion.

Logic was only part of the story. The Brethren of Purity were no advocates of a wholly philosophical approach to divine matters. Revelation was also necessary, serving to remind the soul of its true origin and inspiring it to return to the mind of God. But it was a precarious venture, as we have seen. If you took revelation in its literal wordings, you would only end in doubt and confusion. Thus, while philosophy alone could not get you to God, it was necessary to ensure that people understood the true meanings of scriptural wordings. The true meanings of scripture had nothing to do with images of heaven and hell, however compelling they might be. The point of scripture was, rather, to awaken the mind to its final destiny, namely, union with the mind of God. The Brethren of Purity referred to the mind of God in the language of the day as the universal intellect. This is a long way from the anthropomorphist beliefs of Muslims who, as we saw in the last chapter, aspired not for intellectual union with the mind of God but rather to see God in corporeal form even if not knowing how. This was the crux of the issue: If you remained at the level of literal wordings, thinking of God's message in physical terms, you ended up with theological absurdities such as anthropomorphist beliefs that were incomprehensible even to those who held them. Better, then, to use logic to realize that scriptural images that speak about beholding God one day really refer to inner vision, "the eye of insight" that seeks a life in harmony with the universal intellect.

The overarching goal of the Brethren of Purity was to move believers beyond the corporeal imagery of religion, imagery invariably represented and communicated by words: the flames of hell, the gardens of paradise, God on his throne, believers beholding him in paradise, and so on. Two points from the writings of the Brethren of Purity illustrate this concern that those who read scripture literally will inevitably descend into skeptical confusion if they then try to use their mind to think about what such wordings mean. One, rather, must be ready to interpret scripture allegorically as a preliminary condition for sound belief. The two points are the creation of the world and the pleasures of paradise. Both questions stirred a considerable amount of doubt and confusion, even among believers, including intelligent ones, as seen, respectively, in the following two passages:

Scholars disagree as to whether the world is created or eternal [that is, not created]. The prophets, peace upon them, all held and believed that the world of bodies is created without any doubt. Some of the virtuous philosophers who are well grounded in knowledge also hold this. As for deficient pseudo-philosophers, they are skeptics in what they say and confused in what they claim about the eternity of the world. Similarly, many of the followers of the prophets, peace upon them, although acknowledging the message of the prophets, are also skeptics [have doubts] in what they accept unthinkingly [*taqlid*], and confused in what they hold as doctrine.³⁶

[...]

Similarly, if they hear mention of the garden of paradise, its bounty, and the happiness and pleasures of its inhabitants, they conceive of it corporeally as gardens with fruit-bearing trees and castles among rivers with female and male consorts like people of this world. And they hear that the inhabitants of the garden are near the Merciful One, that they visit the Lord of the worlds, see him, and look upon him. When they think about these things, they become confused as to what they believe about the garden, its bounty, and the conditions of its inhabitants, and so they also come to have doubts about the garden.³⁷

Problems arise when people give rational consideration to the wordings and imagery of scripture. Skepticism, then, did not result only from theological disputation in which opponents sought to best one another rather than establish truth with certainty. The impasse resulted from the inability to get beyond the literal wordings of scripture. Implicit in this dilemma—confusion and doubts resulting from rational reflection on scripture—was the phenomenon of the equivalence of evidence. This is clear in the first passage above on the creation of the world. Scholars had come to a stalemate: Equally compelling arguments could be made for both the creation and the eternity of the world, but both could not be true. Either the world is created as scripture says or it is not. If it is created, one is led to ask how God made it, when he did so, and why he acted to do so. Thinking about such questions—how, when, why the world was created at a particular moment in time—confuses the mind and exposes the soul to doubts.³⁸ This suggests that it might be better to say the world is eternal. In this view, God's role would be limited to shaping the world in its current form but not creating it out of nothing. Those arguing for the eternity of the world were not atheist in the sense understood today. Rather, in their view, the idea of creation at a particular moment in time is inconsistent with God's perfection, since it implies change in his will. According to them, God could not have willed the creation of the world at a time prior to his creating it since whatever he wills immediately comes into being. In other words, God's will is perfectly effective. Thus, the idea that he created the world at a particular moment in time suggests a change in the divine will. At one moment, he did not will it. Then, at another, he did, bringing it into being. His will changed. But change is inconsistent with perfection. If God is perfect, how could he have changed his will from one moment to the next? This would be to say that God is fickle.

The Brethren of Purity responded: Beware of the trivia of scholars! The confusion generated by both positions—creation and eternity—is the result of thinking about things in a physically limited way: how, when, why? The Brethren of Purity seek to move beyond the physical and thus beyond the equivalence of evidence, which invariably results from thinking about this and other questions in a physically limited sense. God, they claim, knew that humans, even intelligent ones, would be exposed to doubt and

confusion—that is, they would find themselves before two compelling but contradictory positions—when applying their minds to the question of the creation of the world. For this reason, they hold, God provided man with a way of knowing the origins of things that goes beyond physicality.³⁹

The solution, one based on logic rather than language, lies in numbers. That is, God's relation to the world is subtler than the question of the world being physically created or physically eternal. It is not like the relation of a builder to a building, which is a physical relation, but rather like the relation of the number one to all numbers. All numbers are not one, but they could not exist without the number one, the basis of all numbering. All numbers are thus implicit in the number one. Similarly, all that exists is related to a single origin: There are two realms, the metaphysical, where truth is one, and the physical, where it is multiple. The first was created at once by a single cause, and the second was created gradually through a series of secondary causes. Thus, the physical order in which humans exist was not created out of nothing nor is it eternal. Rather, it resulted from the imprint that the universal soul, emanating from the universal intellect, left on primordial matter, before returning to its origin in the universal intellect, the author of the metaphysical realm. Thus, the Brethren of Purity warn, be wary of scholastic minutiae: the fashionable talk of atoms and accidents, where accidents (things such as size and color) are said to exist only insofar as they exist in atoms, while atoms, the basic building blocks of all things, are said to be necessarily created or necessarily eternal. Thinking about the world in terms of such minutiae only confuses the mind. It also makes it seem that arguments for two contradictory positions (creation and eternity) are both necessarily true. How can it be said that two positions both qualify as necessary knowledge when they are mutually contradictory? Be wary of scholars who use words in this way, asking why God, if he is all-powerful, cannot make humans sit and stand at the same time. Such talk only mocks the creator. The failure lies in the limitations of matter, not in any deficiency attributable to the creator.

Similarly, the doubt and confusion over paradise, as suggested in the second of the two passages above, is also misguided. To understand the true meaning of scriptural imagery, one has to think logically. The garden of paradise is not a place, nor the flames of hell. Rather, the Brethren of Purity declare, the physical realm of generation and corruption is what is meant by hell. It is in this world that the soul suffers as a result of its physical existence. Its goal is to transcend its bodily limitations for the life of the mind. Indeed, even death should be desired, since it represents the ultimate liberation of the soul from the hell of existence in this world. The Brethren of Purity then go on to say that the metaphysical realm is what is meant by the imagery of the garden. The pleasures one will enjoy there are not bodily but metaphysical, the result of the mind's union with the mind of God. In this and other ways, the Brethren of Purity push the debates beyond the debacle of skepticism as epitomized in the phenomenon of the equivalence of evidence.

Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī: another response to skepticism

The writings of Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī (d. 992), which will be the focus of the rest of the chapter, are also heavily marked by skeptical concerns. Like the Brethren of Purity, ʿAmirī was mystically minded, but in contrast to them, he maintained that religious truth includes apparent realities. One needs to grasp truths beyond apparent realities, but the latter are not mere launching pads to reach the former. Realities in this world also have a claim on truth. ʿAmirī shared the overall philosophical outlook of the Brethren of Purity, including their views on the human soul as potentially angelic,⁴⁰ but he was not inclined to go the way of religious pluralism. That is, he was unwilling to surrender the idea of a single religious truth in this world to a multiplicity of claims. In some areas, such as the question of freewill as opposed to divine determinism, he was willing to acknowledge the truth of opposing arguments. However, when it came to religion as a whole, Islam alone was true, and it was destined to abrogate all other religions, as ʿAmirī declared to his Sāmānid patron in the preface to one of his major works, *The Proclamation of the Virtues of Islam*. At the same time, he held that philosophy had a vital role to play in the service of religion. It could save Muslims from unthinking adherence to beliefs that do not stand up to rational analysis.⁴¹ This would save Islam from skeptical confusion.

ʿAmirī, although little known, played a seminal role in Islam, integrating religion more closely with philosophy while at the same time affirming the uniqueness of its truth claims. He was a pivotal figure in the history of logic in Islam. Heavily influenced by the logic of Aristotle, he took the first steps to refashion it in service to the truths of Islam, a project that Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), among others, would develop in new directions in later periods. In all his works, he highlights the compatibility of philosophy with religion. For example, in a work on metaphysics, he equates the language of scripture with the philosophical categories of the day: The universal intellect becomes the pen by which God writes, and the universal soul, the tablet on which he writes.⁴² In other words, what reason has discovered on its own corresponds exactly to what God revealed through the mouths of prophets, making the beliefs of Islam a wholly logical affair.

The writings of ʿAmirī bear the marks of skeptical controversy, including the idea of the equivalence of evidence. We see this in the opening remarks to a treatise intended to end the interminable debate over human freewill as opposed to divine determinism. Entitled *Deliverance of Humanity from the Comundrum of Freewill and Pre-determinism*,⁴³ it begins as a response to a plea for help from a fellow scholar:

May Allah open for you the path to guidance and preserve you from misfortune when you return to him. I have considered your plaint about the many ambiguities inflicting you about the matter of human acts that

are classified as commanded or prohibited by Allah [that is, as good or evil]. You have found disagreement among intelligent people about whether to attribute these actions to the creator or to humans apart from him. You say that you have considered the matter deeply and studied the books on the topic. In the end, you have concluded that both positions are equally true and that there is parity [*takāfu*] in the two arguments—for freewill and for pre-determinism. You were at first happy to suspend judgment but then felt a fear of being marked with confusion [*taḥayyur*]. Since you think well of me, and hoping I might offer you relief, you asked me to describe the truth of this topic, not in the manner of disputation [*mujādala*] or by exposing the contradictions in the arguments of other schools of thought. Rather, I will proceed by disclosing the matter in its principle and explaining its truth. It is right for the likes of you, who are supported by a solid mind and concerned for the relation of this matter to the teachings of religion, to fear this ambiguity greatly and to have a manifold anxiety for the confusion [*ḥayra*] it produces.⁴⁴

It is not coincidental that ‘Amiri opens a treatise on this topic with words heavily laden with the language of skepticism: The topic was argued in both ways to no end. Also noteworthy is the approach he takes to the topic. To avoid the dubious techniques of disputation, he consciously turns from a theological to a philosophical approach. Thus, as suggested in the title of the treatise, he seeks to save Islam from its own theological practices—and to do so by philosophy. In the end, he acknowledges the truth of both freewill and pre-determinism, but this does not mean he accepts the skeptical impasse without qualification. He is careful to distinguish two kinds of causal systems, one where God determines all things and another where humans are responsible for their actions. It is especially religious duties that make up the latter category, showing the author’s desire to counter those who abandon religious duties with the claim that God has determined in advance that they would do so, making their religious laxity his fault rather than theirs.

‘Amiri argues as follows: God is ultimately the cause of all things, but there is a system of secondary causality (that is, causal agents in addition to God) in the realm of human existence. Humans constitute such secondary agents of causality, having the potential to act according to their own volition. Elsewhere, he suggests that humans have a share in the mind of God to the extent that they make full use of their rational faculty. It is this that allows them to make choices and perform actions without the influence of external forces. In other words, the more they are like God, the freer they are.⁴⁵ By drawing on a philosophical distinction between primary and secondary causes, ‘Amiri resolves a theological conundrum, ending the ambiguity that offered the sly a pretext to pin their religious shortcomings on God’s will.

The idea that all things happen according to the will of God the All-Powerful continues to have place in Islam—even when it comes to things that contravene his revealed directives. The issue at stake is the human capacity to

act when all capacity (*qudra*) belongs to the one real power in the universe. 'Amiri, also in the opening remarks to the same treatise, fears that a failure to resolve the issue will push people into the hands of dualists, who maintain the existence of two eternal and opposing powers, one for good and one for evil. Only in this way, some might conclude, can one avoid attributing evil to God. With its emphasis on God as the sole creator, Islam has no room for dualism, but as such it also becomes difficult to explain why God is not the source of evil in addition to being the source of good.

The argument is philosophically detailed.⁴⁶ It also incorporates the teachings of Islam. Ultimately, 'Amiri claims that some things can be attributed to human freewill while other things cannot. Causality is not singular. People choose to pray and fast; heavy objects fall downwards by nature, not by choice, although external forces can intervene to counter their trajectory; and people, when threatened, react automatically to defend themselves. What are the actions that can be attributed to freewill and what are the ones that God has determined in advance? God has created everything, 'Amiri explains, and he has determined some things in advance. That is, he has created all things with a certain nature. As a result, they will tend to act in certain ways. Heavy objects, for example, will fall by nature. Still, humans undertake a variety of actions, such as praying and fasting, not because of a constraint that has been placed on them but because they grasp the reason for doing so. They choose to undertake them, having realized that by doing so they earn favor with God.

It is noteworthy that 'Amiri classifies religious duties, especially, in the category of voluntary actions. In other words, he is defending religion and religious duty through philosophical argumentation: He lays out a system of causality extending from God as the ultimate cause to other kinds of causes with the capacity to act by their own will, making them secondary causes to God's status as the primary cause. He proceeds step by step, carefully establishing intelligible premises on the basis of which he advances his conclusions. He ends with a vision of causality that is both philosophically sound and religiously true, as the following passages indicate:

We have asserted that actions happen due to two forces. One of them is the force that actually originates the action. The other is the force that is able to undertake the action. [The first applies to God as the origin of all, the second to creatures who have been created for the purpose of acting in certain ways.] We have explained the two ways of inquiring into actions: one by considering the action in itself, and the other by considering it in relation to other things. We have mentioned that actions have meaning in two senses: one is action out of a desire for a better situation and the other is action to bring about such a situation. We also mentioned that the agent [that brings about the act] could be direct or indirect. [For example, a teacher indirectly brings about something by instructing a student how to do it.] It should thus now be known that

creating [as a theological concept] is to determine things in advance. However, when we look into voluntary actions [actions not undertaken as a result of necessity or constraint], we must ask whether or not the creator has determined them in advance.

[...]

The wise person never does anything falsely but always for a well-reasoned purpose. There is no doubt that he has been determined in advance for perfection. [That is, God has created him in advance for this purpose, but this does not mean humans have no agency of their own.] God in his foreknowledge destined him for it and created him in a fashion to be able to undertake the actions for which he had been prepared and made capable of undertaking. It is impossible to imagine that his actions would come into existence were he not endowed with what is needed to undertake them. The actions would be impossible if a power had not fashioned him with a nature designed for the purpose of undertaking them. Thus, the wise person is assuredly bound to do what the One who [alone] creates and commands has determined in advance.

[...]

We have shown that creating [as a theological concept] means to determine things in advance. Thus, voluntary actions [actions not undertaken as a result of necessity or constraint] are not created in the sense of their purposeful relation to other things. [Thus, humans have a nature, created by God, which has determined in advance the purposes for which they will act, but this does not preclude choice in the decision humans have to pursue or not to pursue those purposes.] Here, I mean such things as worship of God and disobedience to God, unrighteousness and piety, unbelief and faith. They cannot be called created insofar as one is set on doing them out of a desire for a better situation [namely, divine favour]. [That is, religious actions exist for a purpose that is intelligible and comprehensible to the mind.] And yet at the same time, there is no problem calling them created when considering them in themselves since they occur only in relation to a force that God created in humans that makes them capable of these actions. Here, indeed, the creator is the first actor with no partner.⁴⁷

Freewill is thus vindicated when one responsibly (that is, deliberately and purposefully) performs one's religious duties, but God's sovereignty as the author of all is also preserved. The argument is admittedly abstruse (hence our interlinear explanations in the above passages) and certainly did not eliminate the confusion it aimed to address. Important for us is what it reveals about 'Amiri and his efforts to transform possibilities into necessities, a theme that marks all his writings. In this case, we are faced with two possibilities about human actions—either they are undertaken voluntarily or determined in advance by God. Convincing arguments exist for both possibilities, making it legitimate for a person to act on the basis of either one: You can live thinking your actions are your own, or you can live thinking God has

determined them in advance. Again, both positions are possible (*jā'iz*) since a compelling argument can be made for each of them. Neither can be affirmed with the same certainty as, for example, the statement that two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time. We thus cannot know for certain whether or not we have freewill.

This is not acceptable to 'Amiri since it allows clever Muslims to get out of their religious duties. The power of logic can be used to bring a question that lies in the realm of possibility into that of necessity: "The judgment on everything the mind sees as possible is suspended until something that is intellectually compelling is found, summoning it to itself, either to affirm it [as necessary] or eliminate it [as impossible]." ⁴⁸ In other words, when it comes to religious discourse, 'Amiri proposes that one is not limited to the endless vagaries of theological debate. One can reach decisive conclusions according to the dictates of pure reason.

Others, including Tawhidi, were less optimistic. It was not that they felt religion was illogical but rather that it occupied a realm different from that of philosophy. The point of religion was to surrender to it and thereby draw close to God. To subject it to rational analysis was to deprive it of the mystery by which it operated. Tawhidi, in a conversation with Ibn Sa'dan, the Buyid vizier whose patronage he enjoyed for a period of time, refers to 'Amiri's treatise on freewill and pre-determinism. In his view, it has not resolved the matter. Indeed, the issue was meant to be a mystery, something God intended to keep from human understanding. We are thus meant to be ignorant about some things. For example, if individuals knew the precise date of their death, the results would be catastrophic, greatly upsetting the order of things. It is better not to inquire into matters that only lead to confusion and risk the loss of religion, as Tawhidi explains:

The reason we have no answer to the question of freewill and pre-determinism is because people fail when they speculate on the matter, and this leads them to confusion [*ḥayra*], and confusion is a source of religious error, and religious error is cause for destruction [that is, it will lead to hell]. Thus, as tranquility [*rāḥa*] can result from ignorance about something, so, too, weariness [that is, a lack of tranquillity] can result from knowledge about something. So much knowledge, if made manifest to us, would result in misery, and so much ignorance, if lifted from us, would result in destruction. Knowledge and ignorance are divided among us and dispersed among us in the amount that each of us can bear. Do you not see what would be the case if we knew when we were to die? Or if we knew in what manner we would be ill, tested, and tried? That would be a source of corruption. Look how Allah the Wise conceals this knowledge from us, making it better for us by doing so. He who looks into the hidden realm and the hidden mystery is neglectful of pure gratitude [that is, gratitude to God for not knowing], fitting submission, and disassociation from every force and power other than Allah. ⁴⁹

While Tawhidi may have been satisfied with mystery, 'Amiri, even if mystically minded, felt too much was at risk not to base religion more solidly on rational foundations. It was not simply out of a desire to vindicate his own faith that he sought to prove the truth of Islam by logic. He also saw religion as the basis of prosperity in this world. It thus had to be rational. What ruler, after all, would want to say that he governs the affairs of his realm by mystery? Important here is the fact that 'Amiri sees the welfare of society as a product of religious injunctions, not the wisdom of philosophy alone. If religion is not defended as the basis of the political order, it will be too easy for the learned elite to dismiss it as superfluous for virtuous actions. It may serve to control the unlearned masses, that is, to make them act virtuously, but the learned could claim to do so without religion. In response, 'Amiri makes religion the lynchpin of sociopolitical welfare. God has made humans his caliphs (that is, representatives) on earth for the sake of building up prosperity in this world, a role the intelligent would surely not leave to the ignorant masses:

It is incumbent for the intelligent man to improve his rational soul by adhering to the teachings of the religious community by which he will gradually come to the truth, believe in the truth, follow the truth, and clearly explain the truth. When captured by doubt [*mirya*] over any religious teaching, he is to take recourse to the arts of logic. He becomes certain that Allah the Majestic and Mighty has honored his being with the light of the intellect by which he might worthily assume the caliphate of Allah, using it to bring about prosperity in the lower world and progress to the ornament of the upper world.⁵⁰

Since the truths of religion apply to the realities of the physical realm no less than metaphysical mysteries, 'Amiri cannot accept the Brethren of Purity's quasi-relativist attitude towards religion. Like them, he looked to philosophy to clean up the theological mess that had been made of Islam, but in his view, religious truth applies to this world no less than to the next. What ruler would want to declare that his realm amounts to hell, as the Brethren of Purity suggested, or that his law is not based on certainty but is merely one of many equally compelling possibilities?

'Amiri composed one of his major works, *The Scope of Eternity*, to counter the "ambiguities of atheists, objections of materialists, doubts of theologians, and invectives of the enemies of religion."⁵¹ The subject of the book, the fate of the soul after death, is only a pretext for 'Amiri to demonstrate that without revelation certain knowledge cannot be attained. This ran against the currents of the day: Certain knowledge came from the philosophical method, not religion. For example, the leading philosopher of the day, al-Fārābī (d. 950), argued that religion was based on imagery (*khayāl*), such as the flames of hell and the gardens of paradise. Religion in this sense had a social benefit, moving the masses, but it could not be true for certain since it was

not based on demonstrable proof. (In various places in his writings, Farabi refers to stubborn people, “the weeds,” who cling to images, thinking they are true in their literal sense.) Such images could move the soul, but they were no more than images. Even a drunk sees images in his stupor and no one says they are real. Were the learned to accept images at face value like the masses? At best, the imagery of religion could *resemble* the truths of existence that were known for certain by those versed in philosophy, for example, that eternal happiness was not the garden of paradise but the reward for a life spent in pursuit of knowledge, and that eternal misery was not the flames of hell but the punishment for a life of ignorance. This, of course, was to imply that the words of the Qur’an represented partial truth at best. Only philosophy could explain the truth of things.⁵²

This raised many problems. It suggested that there were two tracks to get to God, one for the masses, another for the elite, and that there were two versions of truth, one communicated by the images of scripture, the other determined by logic. It also raised questions about the teachings of Islam, especially religious duties. Were they only for the masses, whereas it was enough for the elite to pursue knowledge without the obligation to pray and fast, only to think about the truths of the metaphysical realm? In contrast to Farabi, ‘Amiri does not identify religion with imagery but rather with the rationality of the mind—and thus with logic! It is not the case that all religion, Islam included, is simply imagery, while philosophy leads to certain truth. Rather, there is true religion, ascertainable by the mind, and there is false religion, which fails to meet the standards of the mind. Thus, it is incumbent on all, the masses and learned alike, to follow true religion, since it conforms to reason:

Faith is in reality certainty-based, true doctrine, and its place among the faculties of discernment is the intellectual faculty [the power of the mind]. Infidelity is in reality supposition-based, false doctrine, and its place among the faculties of discernment and distinction is the imaginative faculty. The imaginative faculty could receive true doctrine or false doctrine, but the intellectual faculty is fit only for true doctrine. It is incumbent on the human being to bring all that is related to doctrinal matters that occur in his imaginative faculty to his intellectual faculty, so as to be safe from the deficiencies of untruth.⁵³

‘Amiri is thus claiming that the teachings of Islam—doctrines, traditions, rituals, and laws—are demonstrable by logic. In his age, it was no longer enough to appeal to the miracles of the Prophet to defend the truth of Islam or to subdue Christians in theological debate. Now, logic, something all accepted as a neutral criterion, was the touchstone of truth. Far from being a rival to religion, philosophy would vindicate it. To this end, ‘Amiri begins *The Scope of Eternity* with a summary of the history of philosophy to show that philosophy is not at odds with the beliefs of Islam at a time when many

thought the two were incompatible at least at the level of apparent realities. Given the popularity of philosophy, 'Amiri notes, weak-minded believers opt for it as a whole even when some of its claims run counter to religion.

'Amiri begins by naming those he considers the five great sages of philosophy: Empedocles, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Even if knowing nothing of Islam's belief in the resurrection of the body, they all acknowledged the existence of the maker, the immortality of the human soul, and recompense after death. Having shown that philosophers approached the truths of Islam, 'Amiri then surveys the various branches of knowledge. God esteems all knowledge, making all disciplines a part of sacred history, even those that are the product of human wisdom, such as medicine, as founded by Asclepius, and astronomy, as founded by Hermes. In other words, philosophy is actually part and parcel of revealed religion.

All of this is buildup to the claim that the performance of religious duties is actually necessary for the acquisition of true knowledge. This is so because it is by adherence to religious injunctions that the soul is disciplined, allowing it to move beyond the senses. This, in turn, enables the mind to pursue the truths of existence unhindered by bodily distractions. It is for this reason that 'Amiri makes the striking statement that the human being is religious by nature.⁵⁴ It is the rational faculty that distinguishes humans from other creatures. That is, rationality is the essence of being human. But it is religion that allows humans to overcome their beastly sides, enabling the rational faculty to fulfill its purpose. Thus, religion is the distinguishing mark of human nature. It is religion, 'Amiri says, that gives wings to the mind. If you are intelligent, you will follow religion, since it is religion that allows you to live rationally, unhindered by worldly distractions impeding the workings of your mind.

What about scriptural imagery that defies rationality, such as descriptions of the afterlife? As seen earlier, 'Amiri has a method for establishing the logical necessity of religious teachings. Here, he applies it to the question of the afterlife. Muslims have different views on imagery in the Qur'an related to the afterlife. Those that are logically impossible are easily refuted. The real question is to determine which of the logically possible views is actually logically necessary, making it philosophically true. This, 'Amiri claims, is achieved by awarding the status of logical necessity to the position that outweighs all other possible ones. One of them has to be true. God would not reveal a message without its intention being knowable. But how is one to determine God's intention if believers read his message in different ways? God's intention, 'Amiri contends, is the view that most closely approximates what logic deems to be necessary. When it comes to the afterlife, God's intention is not immediately obvious. One has to weigh one possible view against others. The one that most closely approximates what logic deems to be necessary is the one that is philosophically true. In other words, the ways of logic can be used to determine religious truth, leading 'Amiri to declare that people will view the teachings of religion with the same certainty with which they view the concepts of geometry!⁵⁵

‘Amiri concludes that the Qur’an’s references to the afterlife are a matter of logical necessity, giving them the status of certain knowledge. This is not to deny that many accept these references without thinking about them. Many simply take them as metaphors, not realizing that they are logically necessary. To demonstrate that they are, ‘Amiri sidesteps questions about the physicality of the gardens of paradise and the flames of hell, focusing instead on the Qur’an’s references to the promise of reward and the threat of punishment in the next world. It is here that he can show the logical necessity of Islam’s teachings on the afterlife. Scriptural references to God’s promise of reward and threat of punishment are philosophically true, ‘Amiri argues, because they are the basis of order in society, ensuring that people behave morally: There would be chaos in society if people did not hope for reward as promised in scripture and fear punishment as threatened. The world is to be rationally ordered, and it cannot be so ordered without God’s promise and threat; particular beliefs about the afterlife are thus necessarily rational. The teachings of Islam, then, are not reducible to a socially useful means to control the masses. They are useful as the basis of order in society, but they are also necessarily true by logic, making it incumbent upon the learned no less than the unlearned to follow them.

More so than the Brethren of Purity, ‘Amiri is committed to religious truth in the physical realm. Behind this commitment lay his conviction that knowledge and action go together. In other words, the purpose of knowledge is to live virtuously: Knowledge equips you with practical wisdom by which to act with virtue in life’s varied circumstances. This idea was widely acknowledged in his day, but ‘Amiri identified it closely with religion. To live virtuously, you have to follow the teachings of Islam, but this was contingent on their being true. Why follow the teachings of Islam if one is not certain that they are true? Why act in the name of Islam if you have doubts about its teachings? Here, the skepticism of the day could lead to moral paralysis, which, in turn, posed a threat to the public interest. ‘Amiri showed in *The Scope of Certainty* that the performance of religious duties is integral to the process of acquiring knowledge.⁵⁶ He now has to show that these duties are not only socially useful but also logically necessary. He sets out to do this in *The Proclamation of the Virtues of Islam*, a work in which he displays the totality of his thought.

The Proclamation of the Virtues of Islam dwells on two major themes. First, the fact that religion is necessary for the well-being of society makes it a rational phenomenon. That is, religion, which is needed to achieve a rational goal, namely, order in society, can also be said to be rational. Second, the teachings of religion, while rationally necessary for the reason just stated, are not something the mind can come up with on its own. They involve the particularities of a communal way of life, which philosophy cannot determine. It is thus up to God to reveal them. Thus, revelation is needed for a rational goal to be achieved, namely, the well-being of society, making revelation rationally necessary. It is for this reason that ‘Amiri calls religion the noblest

of all the branches of knowledge; it alone serves the universal interest (*al-maṣlaḥa al-kulliyya*) of society, holding the political order together in a way that no other science can claim to do. This does not make philosophy the enemy of religion, but philosophy only results in abstract concepts, not concrete answers needed to manage life's day-to-day issues in society. This is the role of religion, the teachings of which provide guidance for life in all its particulars. Only religion does this. Thus, religion, the *sine qua non* of order in society, is rationally necessary.

Still, religions are diverse in their teachings. Why pray this way as opposed to that way? Why fast during these hours as opposed to those? Why conduct business this way as opposed to that way? (Commerce in Islam is regulated by shari'a rulings.) Why punish people for transgressions (adultery, theft, and so on) by imprisonment as opposed to public humiliation or corporeal mutilation? Why divide the family inheritance only among the deceased's offspring as opposed to all members of the extended family? Why mourn the dead with great wailing as opposed to viewing the passing of a loved one more stoically? The mind can imagine more than one way of doing things, suggesting, again, that religious matters apply to the realm of possibility, not necessity. 'Amiri had a different view. The mind on its own can deduce universal ethical principles, abstract concepts like justice, equity, protection of the weak, and so on. However, 'Amiri maintains, it cannot come up with the detailed instructions that are vital for the smooth running of society. This makes it necessary for God to provide them through a revealed message.

Revelation is thus a light to illuminate the minds of men, which would otherwise be in the dark about the teachings that bring about the good society. Religious teachings, as noted above, are rational, since they hold society together, but humans cannot come up with them on their own. A higher source of instruction is needed to determine them. This is the role of God. But people disagree about religion. Religion exists not as a single necessity, like the whole being greater than any of its parts, but as many possibilities: Islam was just one. It would thus seem that the teachings that are rationally necessary for harmony in society belong to the realm of possible knowledge. Did 'Amiri unwittingly set a trap for himself, claiming rational necessity for something that is nothing more than a possibility?

As seen earlier, 'Amiri holds that we can locate the logically necessary truth among varied possibilities, even when it comes to religious teachings. We can thus come to decisive conclusions about religious truth. This is the goal of *The Proclamation of the Virtues of Islam*. There, he looks at the major religions of the world, that is, the religious possibilities, and applies rational analysis to determine which of them is logically necessary. How does he do this? He begins with the claim that all religions are essentially divisible into four categories: beliefs, rituals, morals, and penalties for transgressions. From there, he proceeds to analyze each of these categories across the religions of the day according to the standards of logic as set by Aristotle, whereby truth is determined as the mean between the extremes. The criteria for judgment are quantity and quality.

Thus, the religion that strikes the mean between the extremes in terms of quantity and quality in each of the above four categories can be said to be the true one, that is, philosophically true by demonstrable proof! To show that religious teachings are not relative across multiple religions, ‘Amiri sets out to “measure” the world’s major religions according to the mechanics of logic. In this way, he can determine which one is logically necessary and thus true for certain and not just the accident of birth. It is no surprise that Islam meets the standards of logic better than all other religions. Its teachings are thus not simply revealed by God: They are also rationally compelling by force of logic. Islam, then, is no mere possibility. It is true by logical necessity.

‘Amiri begins this work by attacking philosophically minded Muslims who believe they are above religious practices. In this way, he sets the stage for his claim that religious teachings, in all their details, are true by logical necessity, making them incumbent on the very Muslims who hold them in disdain. We see this in the passages below. In the first, ‘Amiri acknowledges reason as the criterion of truth:

If the intellect [that is, reason], which is specific to the human essence, exists to know the truth and to act in conformity to the truth, then it is necessary that the most perfect of people are those who have the most abundant knowledge of truth and are most capable of acting in accordance with truth, and that the basest of people are those who have the most trifling knowledge of truth and are the most impotent in acting in accordance with the truth. The most beneficial of things to the human being for the preservation of his life is to know—when he commits bad things and is not able to prevent people from mentioning them—that he will not manage to silence people by being rough on those who shame him for them, but by reforming his character.⁵⁷

Having established reason as the criterion of truth, ‘Amiri goes on to speak about a group of people who pretend to be learned while claiming that they are above religious duties, which, in their view, are only for the masses to perform:

A group of philosophers and a faction of the metaphysically minded [*al-bāṭiniyya*] allege that those who excel in knowledge [*‘ulūm*] are not obliged to perform the duties of worship [*wazā’if al-‘ubūdiyya*]. They also allege that the intelligent [that is, those who use reason] are not obliged to use the knowledge they acquire for the sake of good works but only to be safe from the barbarity of ignorance, which is by its nature ugly and dark, just as its opposite is good and gratifying. They say, “To equate those who are advanced in wisdom with the classes of ignorant people in regards to religious duties is manifestly despicable. That is to imply that those with knowledge are not the leaders of the ignorant.” This is the gist of the ambiguity [*shubha*].⁵⁸

‘Amiri responds that this group has fallen into egregious error. They fail to see that the performance of good works, which he equates with religious duties, is the basis of prosperity in society. Thus, without the instructions of religion, people would not know how to perform good works and so live in harmony when it comes to the details of daily existence. The knowledge of one’s duties as provided by religion is thus essential for establishing the good society. In other words, knowledge is no end in itself but is to lead one to perform good works, knowledge of which, again, is provided by religion. The error of this faction is to assume that the knowledge they acquire apart from religion can tell them how to act, but it offers no guidance for the details of daily existence, only abstract principles. ‘Amiri mockingly concludes that according to their argument, only the unlearned and ignorant (who rely on the teachings of religion for guidance) would act in society while the truly learned (who do not accept religion) would be right to remain idle. The unfortunate result would be a society where people’s actions are not guided by knowledge:

Whoever chooses this creed [that is, knowledge without action] commits a blatant error. Knowledge [*‘ilm*] is the source of action, and action is the fulfillment of knowledge. One only seeks virtuous knowledge for the sake of good works. If Allah the Exalted had limited human nature to the acquisition of knowledge without the accompanying task of rectifying one’s action, the human capacity for acting would be either superfluous or incidental. If this were so, the absence of action would pose no harm for the prosperity of the lands [*‘imārat al-bilād*] and the governance of slaves [that is, humans, *siyāsāt al-‘ibād*]. On the contrary! Thinking in this way is to restrict good works entirely to ignorant and stupid people. If this were so, then it would be acceptable for humans, by their nature, to undertake good works apart from true knowledge.⁵⁹

‘Amiri explains the thinking of these slackers. Behind their refusal to undertake religious duties lurks the equivalence of evidence. Which religion is true? If this question cannot be answered, then religion is consigned to the realm of possibility, not necessity, making it acceptable not to follow it. After all, it is but a possibility, not a necessity. These so-called libertines claim they are willing to follow the principles that all nations are agreed upon. This, they say, is reasonable, and reason can discover these principles without religion. Such people, ‘Amiri claims, have become enamored by doubt and confusion, and refuse to make the effort to resolve the contradictions they use to justify their religious indifference. They pretend to be rational but actually oppose the consensus of all nations that religion is necessary for the welfare of the world. They will never be accepted anywhere:

Some of the libertines whose impudence and dissoluteness cause them to be disdainful of the duties of worship and to deny the firm commands of

religion claim that there is no rationally necessary knowledge to be found among the religions. [That is, there is nothing logically compelling about religion.] Religions [they claim] amount to legal customs and conventional norms. Every religious community [*milla*] has its share of them, benefiting from them in establishing its way of life and repelling the things that cause disaster [in society]. If there were any truth to these things, they would be based on reason [rather than social convention]. But this could not be the case, since religions have become varied sects and divided parties. [They would not be so divided if religious truth could be determined by the mind.]

[...]

They [the so-called libertines] say: It is useless to degrade the soul with things that are not rationally necessary. Thus, for those who consult their mind, it is best to apply themselves to what all sects agree upon, things like justice, honest speech, fulfilling contracts, executing trusts, supporting the weak, assisting the aggrieved. Those who use the mind should make such principles a way of life for themselves, leaving aside the things that nations dispute over.

[...]

This [‘Amiri says] is the gist of this faction’s claim. Only two kinds of people incline to it: either one whose talent for seeking truth is weak, leading him to confusion [*hayra*] and doubt [*irtiyāb*] about what he believes, or one who has given rein to his immediate pleasures with no concern for the consequences. Such people have no realm to call their own. Indeed, the people of all realms hold them in contempt and raise war against them, judging them to be people of the basest beliefs and vilest actions. Nothing is more barbarous to the intellect than one who lives without command and prohibition [that is, the teachings and rulings of religion], without accountability and responsibility, without the promise and threat [that is, expectation of reward and punishment in the world to come], and without enticement and intimidation [that is, the motivating religious instructions about heaven and hell]. Despite their complete wisdom and effective capacity [to know truth], they are the most neglectful of slaves [that is, humans], possessing a mind in vain.⁶⁰

‘Amiri goes on to explain why adhering to religious duties is actually the most rational thing to do. Reason, he claims, acknowledges the necessity of worshipping God as the creator of all. Worship is accomplished by performing religious duties, but the human mind on its own is not able to determine the correct qualities and quantities of religious duties, making it necessary for a higher authority, namely, God, to disclose this information. Thus, before seeking to determine which religion is true by logical necessity, ‘Amiri has set the stage by showing that it is, indeed, rational to be religious. Even if people differ over religious rulings, all nations agree on the necessity of religious

rulings—beliefs, rituals, morals, and penalties—for the welfare of society. This means that religion is rational:

We should take up what the libertines maintain: As for their statement that religious teachings amount entirely to legal customs and conventional norms, it is based on a false premise: The foundations of all the religions are classified into four sections: beliefs [*i'tiqādāt*], rituals [*'ibādāt*], morals [*mu'āmalāt*], and punishments [*mazājir*]. But these things in essence are also rational, making it wrong to abandon them so long as this world is to be built up by human nature [which, it will be remembered, is religious by definition]. By this, I mean that the pure intellect would not allow rational people not to worship Allah [rituals], conduct themselves well with one another [morals], and prevent evil people from doing ill [punishments]. It is necessary to establish what reason does not permit one to abandon and omit. However, our limited minds are unable to know the correct qualities and quantities of these things. This shortcoming puts us in need of the one who is the source of creation and command [that is, God]. The statement of the libertines that those who consult their mind are best advised to apply themselves to what all sects are agreed upon is based on a faulty premise. Despite the disagreement among religions about the details of laws, they do agree that anyone who entirely rejects rituals, entirely abandons morals, and entirely denies punishments, is not fit for religion or society. Those who turn from religious laws as a result of their excessive passion for the dictates of reason actually end by following the opposite of the consensus of all nations. Reason does not require us to abandon all that those with minds disagree about. Rather, it requires us to delegate the matter [that is, the truth of religion] to the one who is a better guide. Indeed, it is manifestly necessary for every human to be committed to teach those below him and to learn from those above him, and so on, until this chain of knowledge reaches its origin in the singular refuge [that is, God] where knowledge is attainable even when human nature comes up short. Thus, [revelation is necessary], expanding the scope of knowledge and ensuring the good of society [*al-maṣlaḥa*] by showing what religious injunctions are to be logically preferred over others.⁶¹

Religion is thus logically necessary for the rational purposes of human society. It is this that makes religious knowledge superior to philosophical knowledge, even if philosophy offers the measure, logic, by which to determine the truth of things, including religion. Since the prosperity of the world cannot be achieved without religion, religion can be ranked above philosophy as a form of knowledge.⁶² Religion exists as the universal good.⁶³ Having refuted those who say religion is only a possibility, not a necessity, 'Amiri is left with the task of carrying through on his proposal of using logic to show which religion is necessarily true.

The ideas of 'Amiri are at once strange and familiar. We recognize that values are mediated through religious teachings, but we likely would not say that we could draw on the logic of Aristotle to prove them by rational analysis. However, 'Amiri lived at a time when philosophy was king. For him, as noted earlier, while the mind can know universal ethical principles, the details of the moral life depend on revealed religion. Thus, the welfare of society, itself dependent on moral rulings, has need of revealed religion. 'Amiri's views here are very much in line with Aristotle's views on politics, only now they have been reformulated within the framework of Islam. The well-being of the polity, embracing all, is the greatest good. As a result, the knowledge that brings about the well-being of the polity is the noblest form of knowledge. For Aristotle, this is knowledge of governance, political administration, how to rule well. For 'Amiri, it is knowledge of religion. He is not calling for a simplistic implementation of religion. Rather, he is saying that universal ethical principles are not enough to run a polity. Particular rulings for the details of life are also needed. What authority is to establish them? For 'Amiri, since the human mind cannot come up with these rulings on its own, it is left to God's authority to establish them through divine revelation, which, being from God, cannot be subject to doubt.⁶⁴ At the same time, since it was shown by reason that religious teachings are necessary for the welfare of the polity, these teachings cannot oppose reason. Because he has tied the truth of religion to rational argumentation, 'Amiri has to locate its teachings within the bounds of reason. His defense of the rationality of religion requires him to view its teachings through the prism of rationality. They are not simply commands from God but serve the rational purposes of society. 'Amiri is not using reason to call people to fideism.

All that remains for 'Amiri—and it forms the bulk of the work—is to show that Islam's way of life is more effective than others at producing the good, maintaining harmony, and ensuring the well-being of society. In this way, he redirects the skeptical confusion within the umma outwards in the form of a polemic against other religious communities. As with his other works, his method is philosophical, not theological, even if dealing with religious matters. He proceeds by comparing the world's religions according to the neutral criterion of logic. In this way, he demonstrates that a very particular communal way of life, originating in revelation, is no less logically necessary than universal ethical principles.

The religions to be compared are identified by the Qur'an (Q 22:17): The religions of the Muslims, Jews, Sabaeans, Christians, Zoroastrians, and polytheists.⁶⁵ All of them, according to 'Amiri, embrace four categories: beliefs, rituals, morals, and penalties. What follows is a point-by-point demonstration of the superiority of Islam across these categories according to the standards of logic. He also includes sections on the superiority of Islam's system of rule and its knowledge of the world.

Needless to say, Islam emerges as the mean between the extremes of other religions in all categories of comparison. For example, in the category of

beliefs, the monotheism of Islam meets the demands of reason while other religions fall short: Jewish anthropomorphism, Christian tri-theism, Zoroastrian dualism, and polytheism are all logically deficient. Similarly, when it comes to scripture, the Qur'an is the most eloquent of all. The books of other religions are mere collections of human wisdom. Islam's understanding of prophecy, angels, and the end time are all more rationally convincing than their counterparts in other religions. The rituals of Islam, too, are the most balanced of all, taking into account both this world and the next. They stand as the mean between Zoroastrianism, where little attention is given to worship, as if this world were the only concern, and Christianity, which demands constant prayer of its monks, as if the next world were the only concern. In contrast, Islam requires a reasonable amount of prayer, five times daily, appropriately distributed over the course of the day, so that one might live effectively in this world without losing sight of the next. Prayer in Islam is superior, that is, the mean, not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of quality. Its prostrations, resembling homage to a king, are the most fitting way to approach the true king, that is, God, whereas Christian prayer includes singing, which begets a spirit of competitiveness, leading Christians to deviate from true religion.

As a final example, jihad in Islam is also shown to be the most reasonable way to preserve order in the world. It avoids the otherworldliness of Christian and Manichaeon non-violence, which only amounts to political impotency and fails to preserve religion in society. A polity without religion is like a soul whose rational faculty has not subdued its baser instincts, that is, its appetites and passions. It cannot prosper as a result of internal discord. Religion, since it is the basis of society's well-being, must be defended by armed struggle when necessary. This, 'Amiri notes, is exactly what Muhammad did, exposing himself to the violence of society's baser elements so that religious truth might prevail. In this sense, rule no less than prophecy is a gift from heaven (*mawhaba samāwiyya*). Explaining the nature of rule in Islam in terms of rational purposes, 'Amiri grants legitimacy to rulers who rule by the edicts of religion even if they are not descendants of the Prophet. It is justice not genealogy that makes one worthy to be called a caliph of God.⁶⁶

The work concludes with four appendices in which 'Amiri responds to ambiguities (*shubuhāt*) commonly attributed to Islam by its detractors, one of which is creedal diversity. How could there be any truth in a religion that is so fractiously divided? How could anything but doubt result from a community with such divergent views? 'Amiri responds with two points. First, truth is not lost simply because of the existence of differences. Humans are imperfect. It cannot be expected that they be above error all the time but that they hit the mark most of the time. Second, many are angry at the success of Islam and jealous of its scholarly achievements. This motivates pseudo-scholars to sow doubts about religion. It is not a desire for truth but their own disordered inclinations that prompt their attacks against Islam. Besides all this, people prefer witty and charming falsehood to the honestly spoken words of truth,

and ambitious people happily make use of spurious religion for political ends. Counterclaims notwithstanding, one detects a measure of anxiety in 'Amiri's responses to the charges. He even admits that Muslims brought these charges on themselves: "It is necessary to know that the bane which from time to time attaches itself to the realm of Islam should not be taken as a source of shame for the community of the true religion or disgrace for its rightly guided caliphs."⁶⁷

In the end, 'Amiri defends Islam against the claims of elitist Muslims that religion is only for the ignorant masses. He does this by using the thought of Aristotle to show the rational purposes of Islam in this world. In this way, he parts with the Brethren of Purity. It is not that they do not recognize the social utility of religion, but for them, its apparent realities are only images that have no logical necessity, that is, no truth. For them, only the concepts of the metaphysical realm enjoy the status of truth. 'Amiri, in contrast, shows that Islam in all its apparent realities meets the standards of logic. In time, his treatise would fade into oblivion as subsequent scholars developed its ideas with greater effect. But one cannot overlook the contribution of 'Amiri to philosophical theology, paving the way for many others. His lifework amounts to a philosophical defense of Islam's way of life, not just the metaphysical truths it represents. It comes at a critical period in Islam, a time of doubt and anxiety over the role of religion in the world, a time when leading minds were ready to look at Islam in quasi-relativistic terms. 'Amiri, in contrast, defends the integrity of religion as the foundation of the moral order of society.

In contrast to other philosophically minded scholars, 'Amiri affirms that reason does not lead one to dismiss the truths of religion both in this world and the next. Logic can defend Islam in all its details, making it incumbent on the elite to adhere to its teachings no less than the commoners. This may have been the reason that he was not always welcome in the courts of the day. He mounted a strong challenge both to pseudo-philosophy and scholastic theology, the twin sources of the skeptical confusion of the day, namely, the equivalence of evidence. 'Amiri seeks to turn the tables against this skepticism by showing that what most scholars see as possibilities can actually be shown, by force of logic, to be necessities in reality.

In the end, 'Amiri's triumphant defense of Islam contained its own Achilles' heel. In his drive to map out religion in rational terms, he strips it of mystery, as Tawhidi noted in his comments on 'Amiri's treatise on freewill and determinism. While defending religion by philosophy, 'Amiri would contribute to the expectation that religion can only be acceptable, at least for the learned, if it meets the standards of logic. It is not on its own terms but on those of philosophy that religion is validated.

By dragging religion more fully into the realm of philosophy, 'Amiri would pave the way for another crisis of knowledge in Islam, one in which Sufism would play the leading role. That story will unfold in the next chapter. This is not to suggest that 'Amiri was uninterested in Sufism, but the scant evidence from his writings makes it difficult to say what it meant to him. It seems that

it was for him not so much a way for believers to encounter God in the sense we saw with Junayd in the last chapter, but rather a means to discipline the soul in preparation for philosophical pursuits, purifying the mind of worldly distractions that might keep it from using logic soundly. Still, 'Amiri is a pivotal figure at a highly ambiguous moment in Islam when the umma was confronted with its own intellectual and political fragmentation. Could it be said that Islam had failed in its purposes, becoming as divided as the religions it was meant to supplant with its unifying call to God, the one god apart from whom there is no other? Some thought that it was only possible to find the unity of Islam in a world without words, a metaphysical realm where the equivalence of evidence no longer exists as an obstacle to religious certainty.

'Amiri shifts attention to the common good of the polity. One need not go the way of quasi-relativism for religion to be philosophically respectable. That would be the end of Islam. Why follow a religion when its own scholars say it is no different from others? 'Amiri argues that the truths of Islam apply in this world no less than the next. This claim, especially since it was so deeply grounded in philosophy, would be enormously important for subsequent generations of scholars who also looked to philosophy, in their own way, to defend the truths of Islam. But it is worth giving some of the credit for this development to skeptical confusion. It was, after all, the need to counter the idea of the equivalence of evidence that inspired 'Amiri to use his formidable philosophical talents in defense of the uniqueness of Islam.

Conclusion

The battles over skeptical confusion in the tenth century differed from those of the ninth. Controversy over anthropomorphist beliefs continued, but it was now felt that confusion was the result merely of living in a world where differences and disagreement prevailed at all levels of existence. To find truth, one had to transcend this world for the metaphysical realm, where knowledge gained by senses and conveyed by words yielded to rational concepts. Jahiz might have felt a bit out of place in the courtly discussions of the tenth century, where theological discourse, however clearly expressed in Arabic, was deemed insufficient and even offensive, since it only led to a plethora of opinions with no way of solving them, fostering skepticism about the possibility of knowing religious truth with any certainty at all.

Indeed, this skepticism approached something of a creed of its own, signaled in the idea of the equivalence of evidence. Over the course of the tenth century, philosophically minded scholars of varied inclination tried to respond to this skeptical challenge. To illustrate something of the variety, we examined two approaches, that of the Brethren of Purity and that of Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī. The Brethren of Purity, even while recognizing the importance of revelation as the point of departure for one's return to the metaphysical realm, dismissed the literal wordings of scripture as mere images. Others, such as Farabi, would have inclined toward such a view. But the problem with

it is that it strips Islam of its uniqueness. Since, in this view, scripture is not itself true, then any scripture from any religion would serve reasonably well as the point of departure to return to a world of concepts beyond words. The issue was not simply one of religious pluralism but rather how to apply the regnant philosophical method of the day to the reality of diversity. ‘Amiri recognized the dilemma, as witnessed in the epigraph of this chapter, that acceptance of diversity poses a threat to the singularity of truth. He thus mounted a rather ingenious philosophical defense of Islam’s teachings for this world no less than those of the next. This turned out to be a bane as much as a boon for scholarly life in Islam, helping set the expectation that religion was beholden to philosophy to justify itself. Demonstrating the rationality of religion might seem to protect religion from skeptical confusion, but it only reinforced the idea of philosophy as king, leaving religion with no validity of its own, merely a minion in its own court. The rescue of religion from the clutches of philosophy is the story of the next chapter.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Kwame Gyekye, “Al-Fārābī on the Logic of the Arguments of the Muslim Philosophical Theologians,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27.1 (1989), pp. 135–43.
- 2 The debate is recorded in the eighth evening of al-Tawhīdī’s *Kitāb al-Imtā’ wa-l-Mu’ānasa*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥasan Ismā’il (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya 2002).
- 3 Wilferd Madelung, “The Assumption of the Title *Shāhānshāh* by the Būyids and the ‘Reign of the Daylam’ (*Dawlat al-Daylam*),” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 28 (1969), pp. 84–108 and 168–83.
- 4 See, for example, S.M. Stern, “The Early Ismā’īlī Missionaries in North-West Persia and in Khurāsān and Transoxania,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 23 (1960), pp. 56–90. On Isma‘ilism in general, see Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā‘īlis: Their History and Doctrines*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2007).
- 5 Peter Adamson, *al-Kindī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007).
- 6 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ (Letters of the Brethren of Purity)*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir 1999), vol. 3, pp. 152–53. For the writings of the Brethren of Purity, see Nader El-Bizri, ed., *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ and their Rasā’il* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008).
- 7 al-‘Amirī, *Kitāb al-I’lām bi-Manāqib al-Islām (Proclamation of the Virtues of Islam)*, ed. Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Ghurāb (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-‘Arabī lil-Ṭibā’a wa-l-Nashr 1967), pp. 94–95.
- 8 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’*, vol. 3., p. 376.
- 9 *The Scope of Eternity* has been published as *A Muslim Philosopher on the Soul and its Fate: al-‘Amirī’s Kitāb al-Amad ‘alā l-‘Abad*, ed. and trans. Everett K. Rowson (New Haven, CN: American Oriental Society 1988). In quoting from this work, I refer to the Arabic text, slightly editing the given translation. For the just cited passage, see pp. 94, 96, 102, 108, 110, and 112. The Brethren of Purity would agree with the gist of the matter as ‘Amiri explains it, that disputation, if undertaken without first purifying the soul, results in doubts, confusion, and religious error. See *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’*, vol. 4., p. 9.
- 10 See, for example, Joel L. Kraemer, *Philosophy in the Renaissance of Islam: Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī and his Circle* (Leiden: Brill 1986).

- 11 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, vol. 3., p. 484.
- 12 For one example of philosophy as parallel to theology, see Ulrich Rudolph, "Reflections on al-Fārābī's *Mabādī' āra' ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila*," in Peter Adamson, ed., *In the Age of al-Fārābī: Arabic Philosophy in the Fourth/Tenth Century* (London: The Warburg Institute 2008), pp. 1–14.
- 13 Indeed, one anecdote provided by Tawhīdī suggests that the issue was not anthropomorphism per se but rather the confusion it generated: *al-Baṣā'ir wa-l-Dhakhā'ir* (*Insights and Treasures*), ed. Wadād al-Qāḍī, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir 1988), vol. 4, pp. 70–71. There, two men discuss whether any actions can take place without a body. One says that a body is needed for actions to take place, but the other counters by saying that God undertakes actions without a body. The first responds with a highly enigmatic statement that suggests that we cannot be certain if people undertake actions with or without a body since we are not witness to all actions. Similarly, since we are not witness to God's actions, we cannot know how they are undertaken. Here, Tawhīdī interjects, "Do you not see how such as these wrangle about creeds and incline in them to falsehoods, while turning away from seeking the next life with good work, submission, and humility. Do they not know that 'wrangling' [*tamārī*] is derived from 'dispute' [*mirya*], and to dispute is to doubt, and that doubt [*shakk*] and skepticism [*tashakkuk*] in religion and belief lead to destruction, bringing one to the brink of confusion [*ḥayra*]?" What is necessary is the opposite of what they see as necessary [that is, theology]." In other words, the conundrum is not about God having a body or not. The conundrum, rather, is theology itself, since it only increases confusion.
- 14 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, vol. 4, p. 36.
- 15 Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 129–30.
- 16 al-ʿĀmirī, *A Muslim Philosopher on the Soul and its Fate*, p. 58.
- 17 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, vol. 4, p. 10.
- 18 See Paul L. Heck, "Doubts about the Religious Community (*Milla*) in al-Fārābī and the Brethren of Purity," in Peter Adamson, ed., *In the Age of al-Fārābī: Arabic Philosophy in the Fourth/Tenth Century* (London: The Warburg Institute 2008), pp. 195–213.
- 19 See al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*, ed. Muhammad Badr (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya 2009), p. 95.
- 20 Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Fiṣal fī al-Milal wa-l-Ahwā' wa-l-Niḥal*, ed. Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya 1996), vol. 3, pp. 303–19. See also Abdel Magid Turki, "La refutation de scepticisme et la theorie de la connaissance dans les Fiṣal d'Ibn Ḥazm," *Studia Islamica* 50 (1979), 37–76.
- 21 Ibid., p. 304.
- 22 al-Tawḥīdī, *Kitāb al-Imtā' wa-l-Mu'ānasa* (*The Book of Delight and Conviviality*), ed. Muḥammad Ḥasan Ismā'il (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya 2002), p. 502.
- 23 See Iḥsān ʿAbbās, "Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī wa-ʿIlm al-Kalām," *al-Abḥāth* (19) 1966, pp. 189–207.
- 24 al-Tawḥīdī, *Kitāb al-Imtā' wa-l-Mu'ānasa*, p. 507.
- 25 Ibid., p. 506.
- 26 Ibid., p. 504.
- 27 al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Muqābasāt* (*Acquired Lights*), ed. Ḥasan al-Sandūbī, 2nd edition (Dār Suʿād al-Ṣabāḥ 1992), no. 54, p. 237.
- 28 Ibid., no. 35, p. 194.
- 29 Ibid., no. 35, pp. 194–95.
- 30 al-Māwardī, *Adab al-Dunyā wa-l-Dīn*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-ʿUlūm 1988), p. 223.
- 31 See Heinz Halm, "Courants et mouvements antinomistes dans l'islam medieval," in G. Makidisi, Dominique Sourdél and Janine Sourdél-Thomine, eds., *La notion de liberté au Moyen Age: Islam, Byzance, Occident* (Paris: Belles Lettres 1985); and

- P. Crone and L. Treadwell, "A New Text on Ismailism at the Samanid Court," in Chase Robinson, ed., *Texts, Documents and Artefacts: Islamic Studies in Honour of D.S. Richards* (Leiden: Brill 2003), pp. 37–68.
- 32 See Nader al-Bizri, ed., *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and their Rasā'il* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008).
- 33 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, vol. 3, pp. 214–15.
- 34 Ibid., vol. 3, p. 45.
- 35 Abbas Hamdani, "The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā': Between al-Kindī and al-Fārābī," in Omar Alī-de-Unzaga, ed., *Fortress of the Intellect: Ismaili and Other Islamic Studies in Honour of Farhad Daftary* (London: I.B. Tauris 2011), pp. 189–212. On their view of the stature of the Qur'an, see p. 193.
- 36 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, vol. 3, p. 25.
- 37 Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 62–63.
- 38 Ibid., vol. 3, p. 436.
- 39 Ibid., vol. 3, p. 437.
- 40 See al-ʿĀmirī, *Feder, Tafel, Mensch: al-ʿĀmirī's Kitāb al-Fuṣūl fī l-Maʿālim al-Ilāhiyya und die arabische Proklos-Rezeption in 10. Jh.*, ed. Elvira Wakelnig (Leiden: Brill 2006), p. 94.
- 41 al-ʿĀmirī, *Kitāb al-Iʿlām*, p. 87.
- 42 al-ʿĀmirī, *Feder, Tafel, Mensch*, p. 86.
- 43 al-ʿĀmirī, *Inqādh al-Bashr min al-Jabr wa-l-Qadar*, in *Rasā'il Abī l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī wa-Shadharātuhu al-Falsafiyya*, ed. Suhbān Khalīfāt (Amman: Manshūrāt al-Jāmiʿat al-Urdunniyya 1988), pp. 248–81.
- 44 Ibid., p. 249.
- 45 al-ʿĀmirī, *Feder, Tafel, Mensch*, pp. 96, 102, and 112.
- 46 See Elvira Wakelnig, "Metaphysics in al-ʿĀmirī. The Hierarchy of Being and the Concept of Creation," *Medioevo* 32 (2007), pp. 39–59.
- 47 al-ʿĀmirī, *Inqādh al-Bashr min al-Jabr wa-l-Qadar*, pp. 269–70.
- 48 al-ʿĀmirī, *Kitāb al-Iʿlām*, p. 103.
- 49 al-Tawḥīdī, *Kitāb al-Imtā' wa-l-Muʿānasa*, pp. 194–96.
- 50 al-ʿĀmirī, *A Muslim Philosopher on the Soul and its Fate*, p. 96.
- 51 Ibid., p. 54.
- 52 Indeed, Farabi would challenge the very cosmology of the Qur'an in favor of philosophical explanation. The cosmology of the Qur'an speaks of seven heavens above seven earths with God's throne and stool at the top, while celestial bodies, located in the lowest heaven, move through the cosmos in fixed orbits. However, in contrast to the vision of the Qur'an, Farabi posited a very different cosmology, one that favored the eternity of the world over its direct creation by God and included independent causal agents known as "intellects" that mediated between divine rationality and worldly reality. See Damien Janos, *Method, Structure, and Development in al-Fārābī's Cosmology* (Leiden: Brill 2012). Such diverse conclusions about the reality of existence, revealed and philosophical, did not always and invariably result in a clash between faith and reason but rather could encourage scholars to reconsider the relation of revealed texts to humanly acquired knowledge. There were those, such as Farabi, who looked to some or all of scripture as mere metaphor for the reality of things that only the demonstrable proofs of philosophical reasoning could determine for certain. Others, such as ʿĀmirī, sought a more seamless cloak between divinely revealed and humanly acquired knowledge, positing, for example, a prophetic origin for non-revealed disciplines such as philosophy, astronomy, and medicine, as earlier discussed.
- 53 al-ʿĀmirī, *A Muslim Philosopher on the Soul and its Fate*, p. 168; *Kitāb al-Iʿlām*, p. 83.
- 54 Ibid., p. 96.
- 55 Ibid., p. 162.
- 56 al-ʿĀmirī, *A Muslim Philosopher on the Soul and its Fate*, p. 140.

- 57 al-‘Āmirī, *Kitāb al-I‘lām*, p. 77.
- 58 Ibid. p. 78.
- 59 Ibid., pp. 78–79.
- 60 Ibid., pp. 101–02.
- 61 Ibid., pp. 102–04.
- 62 Ibid., p. 100.
- 63 Ibid., p. 105.
- 64 Ibid., p. 106.
- 65 Ibid., pp. 123ff.
- 66 Ibid., pp. 153–55.
- 67 Ibid., p. 158; cf. p. 78.

3 Truths beyond words, truths beyond ideas

How can humans agree when they were created to disagree?

Ghazali (d. 1111)

Baghdad bewildered

Baghdad in the eleventh century no longer exuded the vibrant confidence of its earlier days. Situated in the cradle of human civilization, it had been built on the hope that Islam would elevate past cultural achievements to new heights. Such optimism had made Baghdad teem with intellectual creativity, both theological and philosophical. The prophetically revealed knowledge of Islam, it was expected, would draw upon and surpass the wisdom of pre-Islamic cultures. But this enthusiasm gradually yielded to pessimism. Nothing had changed. The same conundrums persisted. Solutions to life's questions remained as elusive as ever. Did Islam have the answers? So much time had passed since the age of the Prophet that it was no longer clear that anyone knew how to apply his message effectively to the issues of the day. Was the umma still properly guided or had it lost its way? The sense of uncertainty found voice in a hadith predicting a time without scholars:

Allah will not take away knowledge by removing it from the people. He will take it away by seizing the scholars. Then, when no scholar is left, people will follow ignorant leaders, who will give fatwas without knowledge. These leaders will be in error and will lead people into error.¹

Now in the eleventh century, five centuries since the beginnings of Islam, there were indications that this hadith had come to pass. Life was as obscure as ever. Muslims, even if they possessed God's incomparable message to humanity, were now little different from other peoples with no claim to clear guidance from God. The revealed message, it seemed, had had no noticeable effect. The world was as it ever had been, and Islam's scholars had little to offer. Indeed, the bulk of them seemed enamored with status and patronage, making them models of worldly ambition more than spiritual aspiration.

Those who were supposed to have the knowledge needed to guide the umma were themselves misguided. Surely, all of this was evidence that the above hadith had been fulfilled. It was not a question of Islam having the answers but whether a scholar could be found to communicate them.

Reviver of Islam: Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1111)

One figure made every effort to halt the decline and revive the umma: Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) had great disdain for scholars who failed to live according to the religious knowledge they professed to possess.² Born towards the middle of the eleventh century in what is today north-eastern Iran, he combined intellectual prowess with scholarly independence and deep faith. It was this that brought him to the attention of powerful figures, but official patronage did not deter him from his ultimate goal, namely, the establishment of certainty. If he could convince Muslims, especially the learned among them, that the teachings of Islam were true, they would have to follow them. This, in turn, would inject new life into the umma and revive its soul. Only the thoroughly obstinate, once presented with a compelling argument for the truth of Islam as certain, would ignore it for falsehood.

Ghazali was partly motivated by personal reasons. Although the foremost scholar of his day, he underwent a skeptical crisis of his own, one he never fully resolved. He had been appointed in 1091 to the post of chief teacher at the Nizamiyya Madrasa in Baghdad, then the leading center of learning in the Abode of Islam. Upwards of three hundred students at a time would pursue knowledge under his tutelage. He wrote extensively on various subjects, including theology, philosophy, ethics, politics, and law. Some of his writings got him into trouble. In his own day, scholars would accuse him of being unduly influenced by philosophy and of claiming that people could become prophets through their own efforts, and his magnum opus, *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*, would be put to flames in Cordoba in 1109 by decree of the city's chief magistrate with the support of 'Alī Ibn Yūsuf Ibn Tāshfīn (d. 1143), the Almoravid ruler then in power in Marrakesh.³

According to his own words, Ghazali's crisis began in 1095 at the height of his professorial career. After four years at the Nizamiyya, he came to the realization that he had become a skeptic in fact if not in name. He concluded he could not even trust his senses since appearances from sense impressions deceive, requiring the mind's correction. For example, the oar in the river looks bent, and the sun appears small to the naked eye, but the mind informs us of the falsity of such impressions. But if the senses could not be trusted without the mind's oversight, what was to say that the mind could be trusted without oversight? Such was the learned ignorance to which Ghazali would call the philosophers. He had long been attracted to philosophy as a compelling guide to knowledge, especially since, as he well knew, theological argumentation turned in contrary directions, fostering endless wrangling among Islam's varied sects. At the same time, he could not accept the claims

of philosophers, the likes of Avicenna (d. 1037), to total knowledge of God since such claims made Islam's message superfluous. He had to humble the philosophers without prejudice to the power of philosophy and he found a way to do so in a kind of skepticism that can be called learned ignorance: The most erudite scholars of the umma (that is, the philosophers) should recognize that at some point human reasoning breaks down when it comes to final knowledge of God, making it necessary to submit to prophetic instruction for certainty about the nature of God.

The state of confusion made it easy to exploit the faithful at large. In Ghazali's view, the missionaries of Isma'ilism (a branch of Shi'ism with a living imam effectively serving as God's mouthpiece on earth) preyed upon the theologically confused (*mutahayyir*),⁴ calling them to submit to their imam. The imam was not simply the custodian of the community's religious teachings. He was a quasi-divine source of guidance that the umma at this time so desperately craved. This was too much for Ghazali. Even if he, too, was greatly disturbed by the theological chaos of the day, he was not about to accept what he saw as the divinization of a human being. Believers might be unable to settle on a single truth, but that was no reason to abandon the mind and naively submit to the instruction of a figure claiming to be the font of divine instruction with special immunity from error. What was the proof of his stature? Without proof, his views could not be said to be any truer than others. Disagreement within the umma should not be taken as evidence that the human mind was wholly unreliable. Despite its limitations, it could still point believers in the right direction.

Ghazali, we will see, held that philosophical reasoning does yield knowledge about God. Through reasoned reflection on the things of the world, we can learn something about its creator. This, in turn, implies that the mind has a role in understanding the meanings of God's attributes (or names) as revealed in the Qur'an (that is, God's descriptors: merciful, just, powerful, all-hearing, all-seeing, sublime, great, majestic, and so on). In contrast to obscurantist thinking that would require believers to accept God's attributes in their literal wordings, Ghazali had confidence in the ability of the mind to grasp the conceptual meaning of such wordings, making it possible for believers to identify with God's attributes. The point in doing so was to enable the human soul to be rightly ordered with the rational faculty master over one's appetites and passions. For example, in a work on God's attributes, Ghazali explains the meaning of "king" (*malik*), as follows: On the one hand, a king needs nothing whereas all need him. In this sense, the name applies only to God. But the human being has a kingdom in his soul where his soldiers are his appetites and passions and his subjects, his bodily members. If he rules them and they do not rule him, he will attain the rank of king in this realm.⁵ Here, Ghazali emphasizes the ethical significance of God's names. They are not just wordings for believers to accept unthinkingly. They have meaning beyond their wordings, allowing humans to identify with them and thereby aspire to the ranks of angels.

However, Ghazali insisted, there are limits to what the mind on its own can know. Philosophers should admit ignorance about God's incomparably infinite reality. No matter how much one reasons about created things, they remain finite in relation to God. They can tell us something about the power of the being that created them, but reasoning ultimately breaks down when it comes to knowledge of the reality of God. There is no standard for comparison: We cannot reason back to the infinite through analogy to the finite. Still, the human is not left in the dark about God. Such argumentation for ignorance about God actually teaches us something.

In diverse places, Ghazali speaks of such learned ignorance in the following terms: "the inability to comprehend is a kind of comprehension" (*al-'ajz 'an al-idrāk idrāk*). The point is that philosophical reasoning alone is limited as a way of knowing God's reality, but this conclusion opens to another approach to knowing, one that does not dismiss philosophical reasoning but incorporates mystical seeing. Ghazali is not calling for resignation to mystery or the end of scholastic reasoning but the broadenings of its scope. He is not suggesting scholars can actually see God but rather that they should admit the limits to knowledge based on philosophical reasoning alone. To be sure, Ghazali does not reject the ability of the mind to know something about God, but given the mind's limits, there is need for a surer approach that *starts* from God as the source of all being(s) rather than reasoning to him as the endpoint of philosophical reasoning, which, thanks to learned ignorance, is not a sure method for knowing God. It is not only that one cannot know God's uncreated and thus infinite reality by philosophical reasoning. One also cannot know the reality of created things through philosophical reasoning. In other words, if you want to know the reality of a thing, you must know it in terms of the source of its being, namely, God. The breakdown of philosophical reasoning about the reality of existence thus does not spell the end of knowledge but rather requires a shift in approach from philosophical to mystical scholasticism. To know things as they really are, one has to consider them not with the physical eye insofar as they are part of a created order but, rather, with the eye of the heart, as they exist in God.⁶

Ghazali thus bests philosophy on its own terms, demonstrating that scholastic reasoning of the philosophical kind does not yield sure knowledge of the true reality (*ḥaqīqa*) or quiddity (*māhiyya*) of God.⁷ This, in turn, raises a problem about our knowledge of all being(s). If we cannot know the source of being, can we claim to know anything about the beings derived from that source? Scholastic reasoning, then, is limited not only when it comes to knowledge about God in his infinite reality but also in terms of the reality of things. Things can be known by scholastic reasoning insofar as they are part of the rational order of the world, but to be known as they *really* are, they must be known as they truly exist in the source of their existence, namely, God. Here, scholastic reasoning cannot deliver knowledge of things as they really are because the mind on its own cannot grasp the infinite dimension of things. God in his infinite reality is incomprehensible to scholastic

reasoning. This makes it necessary to seek knowledge of the incomprehensible God by another method. This is the gist of learned ignorance: God cannot be grasped by philosophical reasoning since God has no limit by which to be defined. But this is to say that God has no opposite. Thus, while God is not the world, God is also not other than the world, putting God within sight, not the sight of the physical eye but that of the eye of the heart. Thus, if one is truly learned, one will see the world as it exists with God and not simply as part of a created order comprehensible to the mind. The surer method is a kind of mystical seeing that builds upon even while going beyond philosophical reasoning. However, to work, such a method requires a monistic view of existence. One does not behold the essence of God, but in beholding things, one sees them not merely as part of a rational order but insofar as they exist with God.

Ghazali had grown weary of the confessional partisanship within the umma, to say nothing of the politics fueling it. What about philosophy? It had a method, namely, logic, by which to separate truth from falsehood and right from wrong. But things in the eleventh century were not as they had been in the tenth when 'Amiri could turn to logic to prove the truth of Islam. In the eleventh century, philosophy had come to pose a serious threat to the veracity of revealed religion. Rather than serving to defend Islam, it had become the alternative to Islam, especially in learned circles, offering a surer method than revelation, based on demonstrable proof, about the origins and ends of existence. Disagreement was manifest when it came to the meaning of God's revelation. If theology only begot endless division, expertise in syllogistic reasoning, based, as it was, on demonstrable proof, should in principle end in singular results. In the eleventh century, a commitment to philosophy by no means implied a rejection of the existence of God. Rather, such a commitment assumed that the philosophical method provided surer knowledge of God than revelation.

It finally dawned on Ghazali amidst his professorial duties that his own confusion had put the fate of his soul in jeopardy. He quit his post at the Nizamiyya to devote himself wholly to the resolution of his doubts. Since he was so widely known in Baghdad, it was necessary to go elsewhere to pursue his goal undisturbed. Excusing himself on the pretext of making the pilgrimage to Mecca, Ghazali slipped out of the City of Peace and made his way first to Damascus, where he would spend most of the next two years in contemplative retreat. Sequestered away from the demands of the world, he found his answer—or at least a partial one—in Sufism.

The spiritual practices of Sufism gave Ghazali the healing remedy he needed for his troubled soul, but Sufism did not provide him with the solution to his theological confusion. For knowledge to be certain, it had to be logically demonstrable. Philosophy, not Sufism, held the key to certain knowledge, but Sufism did provide Ghazali with the insight that he would eventually incorporate into his overall system of knowledge. From Damascus, Ghazali would visit the holy sites in Jerusalem, Medina, and Mecca. By 1097

he was back in Baghdad, but not for long. He resumed teaching for a period, this time in Nishapur, a cultural center of the day not far from his hometown of Tus. Ghazali had studied in Nishapur in his younger days under the direction of Abū l-Ma‘ālī al-Juwaynī (d. 1085), one of Islam’s most renowned scholars. He would now spend his last years in Nishapur, consolidating his ideas about knowledge, teaching them to select disciples, and fending off the accusations of fellow scholars, only to return to Tus shortly before his death in 1111.

The synthesis

Ghazali constructed a rather extraordinary system of thought. He managed to combine philosophy and theology in a single framework of knowledge,⁸ but this, ironically, required him to take a skeptical posture towards philosophical reasoning. We catch a glimpse of this in his so-called autobiography, *The Deliverance from Error*:

The prophets, peace upon them, are the physicians of the diseases of the heart, and the mind exists to inform us of that, and also to testify to the truth of prophecy and to *its own inability to grasp what the eye of prophecy grasps*. The mind hands us over to prophetic instruction as the blind are handed over to guides and as those who are sick and confused are handed over to compassionate physicians. This is the point of the mind, and nothing more thereafter, *except to understand what the physician prescribes for it*. During the period of our retreat in Damascus, we came to know these things as a matter of necessity [that is, with the same certainty] as we obtain knowledge of something when seeing it as an eyewitness.⁹

Coming from a work that Ghazali wrote partly to defend his ideas against the accusations of fellow scholars, this passage illustrates the careful balancing act that makes up his system of thought. First of all, to claim truth for prophecy, Ghazali argues by philosophical reasoning that the mind on its own is unable to know the true reality of God with certainty. This is what is meant by the phrase, “*its own inability to grasp what the eye of prophecy grasps*.” By force of its own reasoning, the mind recognizes its limits, and acknowledges its need for prophetic instruction to obtain knowledge of God. However, the mind still has a role to play even once it has submitted to prophecy. In this regard, Ghazali is careful to avoid the obscurantism he attributes to Isma‘ilism, which calls people to suspend the operations of the mind in favor of the divine instruction of the imam. Healing for the soul does come from prophecy, making the Prophet a physician of the heart, but the medicament prescribed by the prophet, that is, the teachings of Islam, cannot be unfathomable to the mind. The dictates of reason continue to be operative even after the mind has recognized its own limits and submitted to prophetic

instruction. This is what is meant by the phrase, “*except to understand what the physician prescribes for it.*” Ghazali not only demonstrates the limits of the mind, but he also shows that the teachings of the prophets are logical, leading him to argue that God taught the prophets the formulas of logic along with the truths of the other world.

Ghazali’s ideas move in a myriad of directions, making it difficult to define him. He is greatly committed to logic, but he is not quite a philosopher. He is greatly indebted to Sufism, but he is no mystic. His goal is to explain the workings of the world in a way that accommodates the conclusions of the mind without, however, making revelation superfluous. He accepts the idea of a causal order, the workings of which can be known by reasoning. Without the assumption of a causal order operating independently of God’s potentially arbitrary interventions, there would be no way for the mind to know anything at all. But Ghazali also defends the theological claim that God has a decisive role in human affairs, especially in relation to the spiritual realm. In some of his works, notably *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, he expresses his reservations about a causal order, suggesting his preference for a world where God makes all things happen as they do—as opposed to a world where things happen according to their own natures. However, in other places, Ghazali’s thought depends on the recognition of a causal order. Thus, when expressing his reservations about a causal order, his goal is not to reject philosophical reasoning but rather to humble philosophers. There is a causal order where philosophical reasoning applies. On this basis, we can know much about the world and a little something about God. But there is another order where mystical awareness of existence in its true reality has privilege over philosophy. Ghazali argues for the limits of philosophy even while committed to it. It tells us much, but it does not tell us everything.

The goal, again, is not merely to get philosophers to accept prophetic instruction but more fundamentally to open a new horizon of knowing that functions according to mystical insight beyond the *ratio* of philosophy. Nevertheless, Ghazali seems to embrace two contradictory systems of causality, one in which things in the world operate according to their own natures apart from divine intervention and one in which God is the sole cause of all that occurs. Does this make Ghazali a skeptic whereby he willingly accepts contradictory positions, not to undermine the process of knowing but only to suggest a higher method beyond philosophical reasoning? Ghazali hints at this in *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*. Discussing human freewill as opposed to God’s absolute omnipotence, Ghazali states that what appears contradictory in this world is not so in the spiritual realm (*‘alam al-malakūt*). Those with mystical insight are able to see how both can be true!¹⁰

Ghazali would not have called himself a skeptic, but he does accept two contradictory viewpoints on the workings of the world. Is it that he cannot decide which is true and so accepts both? In fact, while heavily indebted to philosophy, Ghazali uses a kind of skepticism to refute the claims of philosophers to certain knowledge of God. Knowledge of God obtained by

philosophical reasoning may be true, but it does not enjoy the status of certainty. This is the issue. Ghazali accepts many things the philosophers say about prophecy,¹¹ but he also advocates learned ignorance, claiming, by demonstrable proof, that the mind knows that it cannot know God on its own. Thus, if reasonable, the learned will admit the need of prophecy for certain knowledge of God, recognizing a mystical method of knowing in addition to the philosophical one. It is, then, especially the most learned of believers who should admit their ignorance in this regard. Ghazali is advancing a kind of skepticism to deflate the philosophical pretension that a better knowledge of God can be obtained through reasoning even apart from God's revealed message.

It is possible, Ghazali admits, to acquire knowledge of God by philosophical methods, but such knowledge is only partial. To show this, he makes use of skepticism, that is, a call to learned ignorance. In this way, prophecy retains its importance. It provides the certainty that philosophy fails to provide when it comes to knowledge of God in his infinite reality. At the same time, Ghazali concedes everything else to philosophy. He recognizes the potentially boundless knowledge of the world that philosophers might obtain, but when it comes to God's relation to the world, they should admit ignorance. In the language of his day, Ghazali is saying that God lies beyond the realm of the active intellect (that is, a celestial being that the human mind can access in order to acquire knowledge of God's reality). God's ways are knowable insofar as they manifest themselves in the created realm, but the truth of God remains unknowable to the mind. For this reason, he reveals himself through a prophetic message, which is not superfluous but has an impact on the human soul, enabling it to see the reality of things via its inner eye. It is at the level of the heart that God's agency is directly operative, enabling humans to see things as they really are, provided they prepare themselves for the light God casts into it. This light is itself a complex phenomenon. Logical argument ignites it by proposing indubitable truths to the mind through syllogistic reasoning, but it is enflamed by revelation of otherworldly knowledge. A combination of human reasoning and divine speech (conveyed by revelation) allows the mind to see where before it was in the dark.

The challenge of Avicenna (d. 1037)

What had changed since the tenth century? Like many scholars of his day, Ghazali was greatly attracted to philosophy as a method for knowing the realities of things, but he was also aware of its dangers. If past scholars such as 'Amiri had looked to the logic of Aristotle to prove the truth of Islam, now, in the eleventh century, philosophy was on the verge of riding roughshod over Islam.¹² One figure in particular was responsible for the new situation: Avicenna (d. 1037), a brilliant thinker with a highly scientific bent and also, apparently, a strong libido. He enjoyed patronage from the various courts of

his day but also faced threats to his life on account of his ideas.¹³ Avicenna was no atheist. Islam permeates his philosophy. But his thought is quasi-deist. He explains religion, including prophecy, in terms of the rationality of the mind rather than as a divine (that is, meta-rational) communiqué. He also explains the workings of the world according to a system of causality of its own, leaving no room for miracles that would involve the suspension of the natural laws of the universe. A learned reader such as Ghazali might draw the conclusion from the writings of Avicenna that recourse to God was not needed to explain the truths of existence. Avicenna's thought veers in this direction: The world follows a system that may originate in divine wisdom but is nevertheless explicable on its own terms. Indeed, God can only hope that the world cooperates with his will.

The system of Avicenna, if not reframed, ran the risk of stripping religion of its own authority, forcing it to define itself in terms of philosophy. Ghazali was thoroughly influenced by Avicenna, but he also realized that Avicenna's ideas needed to be domesticated within Islam if Islam was to operate on its own revealed terms. He initiates this project through skepticism, calling upon the most learned members of the umma—he means the philosophers—to admit their ignorance. Avicenna would have been ill inclined to do so. It is here that Ghazali distinguishes himself from the great philosopher, even when accepting so much of his thought, reviving Islam not by means of logic, even if greatly indebted to it, but by doubt about the power of philosophy. Ghazali is no obscurantist but he does seek to find a way to preserve the integrity of Islam as the means of acquiring certain knowledge.

Avicenna was as much a scientist as a philosopher, and this helps explain his outlook. Science is impossible without the assumption of a system of rules: The world has to have its own logic for scientific inquiry to make sense. But this is to relegate God to the sidelines. God may have created the world as a system of interlocking causes, but to understand the world one had only to understand the system by which it was made, while ignoring its maker. There was no need to petition God for help or expect him to intervene in the world in miraculous ways. The system was set in advance. It was enough simply to know cause and effect. A prophetic message from God was useful for the masses but not for the learned.

In Avicenna's view, prophecy was not so much a communiqué from God, that is, divine speech, as it was a human expression of universal rationality. This was to turn prophets into expert philosophers with unsurpassed skill in syllogistic reasoning. To be sure, there was a difference: Prophets had a disposition to receive truth effortlessly while philosophers had to work at it.¹⁴ Still, there was no essential dividing line between what prophets communicated by inspiration and what philosophers demonstrated by syllogistic reasoning. In this sense, it was not the performance of miracles that established the veracity of a prophet. A prophet was a prophet because his soul had a special disposition to universal rationality. It was not by miracles but by standards of rationality that a prophetic message could be verified.

Avicenna thus advanced a philosophical position on prophecy that was not entirely unknown in previous centuries. (Farabi had also thought of prophecy as a kind of human cognition.) By the eleventh century, the philosophers of Islam conceived of prophecy as a natural even if intensified form of human rationality.

Ghazali would be influenced by this notion of prophecy, even as he altered it to preserve the notion of prophecy as a message from God. He would make use of Avicenna's idea of prophecy as a natural even if rare phenomenon to suggest that believers, at least the spiritual elite among them, could experience what the prophets had experienced. He was not suggesting that people could become prophets, not even the spiritual elite, but only that they had the potential of becoming prophet-like. By following the Prophet's teachings, adhering closely to ritual prayer, and constantly reciting the names of God, humans could reach a state of awareness allowing for a taste (*dhawq*) of the knowledge of prophets.

By becoming prophet-like in this sense, the saints of Islam had access to the knowledge that prophets had of the reality of existence, even if they were unable to express it in words or even conceive it as a set of ideas in the mind. It was, after all, a meta-rational phenomenon, not unlike dreaming. Even if beyond words and ideas, this meta-rational phenomenon, that is, the mystical insight of the truly learned among Muslims, constituted a valid approach to knowledge: It was a way to verify the existence of something that the senses and even the mind could not apprehend on their own. The truly learned, not the philosophers but the friends of God (*awliyā' allāh*) or saints, could "see" the reality of existence by the "eye" of the heart. It was a light that God cast into their hearts to illuminate the truths of things beyond what the senses and the mind could determine. With the shift from philosophical to mystical scholasticism, one becomes attuned to seeing things as they exist with God.

One of Ghazali's goals was to verify the truth of prophecy. To know the reality of a thing, he claimed, you had to "be" it. Thus, for example, a student could never know his teacher in reality until he became a teacher himself. But how is one to acquire knowledge of God by this method? People could not become godlike as a way to experience and thereby know the truth of God. However, by suggesting that people could become prophet-like, Ghazali maintained that they could know things as the prophets knew them. In this way, the knowledge of God as conveyed by revelation could be verified by mystical awareness or, as it were, insight.

It is thus mystical scholasticism that corroborates the truth of prophecy. The truly learned can "see" what the prophets know, allowing them to "demonstrate" the reality of prophecy, even if they are unable to communicate it in words or even conceive it as ideas in the mind. Ghazali is not being coy when at various places in his writings he hints at but refuses to speak of mystical disclosures. It is simply impossible to put such disclosures into words or even construe them as ideas in the mind, but they do serve as grounds for his reframing of the scholastic project. Surer knowledge of the

realities of things is obtained by starting from God as the source of their being, a process that assumes mystical awareness, even if such awareness results not from the direct experience of mystical disclosures but rather as the fruit of learned ignorance.

Learned ignorance

What, then, does Ghazali mean when he speaks of the truths of things? Things are known in different ways, and this is no less true when it comes to knowledge of God. You might know things about God because others have informed you of them. This knowledge is least sure since it is based on hearsay. It might be true, but you cannot know with certainty until you prove it for yourself. (It is for this reason that Ghazali is fully committed to logic of the philosophical kind, a topic on which he wrote much.)¹⁵ For example, we can know by demonstrable proof that it is logically absurd to say that the world's maker is weak or ignorant or dead. Unlike hearsay, this knowledge is certain since it is logically demonstrable, but there is a still higher level of knowledge that involves, oddly enough, the inability to know.

The highest level of knowledge comes by taste (that is, mystical insight). Only the truly learned can know the truth of prophecy because they have acquired a taste of it through mystical insight. This, however, does not apply to knowledge of God. One can have a taste of being a prophet, so as to know what the prophets knew, but one cannot say one has had a taste of being God, making it impossible to know God in reality. Yet this recognition is a kind of knowledge that philosophers fail to grasp. They erroneously think that they can know God's reality via philosophy.

Ghazali thus locates the truths of things beyond words and also beyond ideas one might conceive in the mind. This makes up the core of Ghazali's skepticism, which serves to counter the philosophical presumption of knowing the truths of things, God included, by the *ratio* of philosophy. The fact that we cannot fathom God by the philosophical method casts suspicion on all knowledge obtained in this fashion. In echo of Socrates, Ghazali argues that those who really know God actually know that they do not know God—at least not by philosophy. Indeed, Ghazali bases this claim on demonstrable proof (*burhān*). He is calling philosophers, on their own terms, to admit ignorance for the sake of reaching the highest knowledge of God:

The endpoint of the knowledge of the knowers is their inability to know [*'ajzuhum 'an al-ma'rifa*]. Their knowledge in truth is that they do not know him; that it is completely impossible to know him; that it is impossible that anyone but Allah the Mighty and Majestic know Allah with true knowledge encompassing the essence of the attributes of lordship. If that is disclosed to them by demonstrable proof [*inkishāf burhānī*], as we noted ... they would reach the endpoint that is possible for creation [humanity] to know.¹⁶

Ghazali clarifies what he means by referring to the phrase in the Arabo-Islamic heritage, attributed to Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (a leading companion of Muhammad), for learned ignorance: “The inability to grasp comprehension is a kind of comprehension.” He then affirms the point of knowing the incomprehensible (God) through a method beyond philosophical reasoning, as seen in the following remark: “Thus, no creature, in examining the reality of his essence [*ḥaqīqiyyat dhātihī*] obtains other than confusion and stupefaction.” In echo of Junayd, Ghazali is relocating philosophical reasoning within a broader framework of knowing, where through the admission of ignorance, one reaches a higher knowledge of God:

Someone who says, “I know only Allah,” is right, and someone who says, “I do not know Allah,” is also right. It is well known that the denial and affirmation of a single thing cannot both be right. If the denial is true, the affirmation is false, and vice versa. But if the two statements differ in manner of speech, they are both conceivably right, as when one says to another, “Do you know Abū Bakr?” The other responds, “Al-Ṣiddīq? [This is the title, ‘the righteous one,’ by which Abū Bakr is commonly known.] Who is ignorant of him? Is it imaginable that there is anyone in the world who does not know him, given his name and the spread of his fame, as heard from pulpits and in mosques and on the tongues of people?” By saying this, he would be right. But he would also be right if he said, “Who am I to pretend to know al-Ṣiddīq? How preposterous! No one but al-Ṣiddīq knows al-Ṣiddīq, save those like him or above him. Who am I to claim knowledge of him or even to aspire to it? The likes of me only hears his name and his description, whereas to pretend to knowledge of him is impossible.” So we should similarly understand the two statements: “I know only Allah” and “I do not know Allah.”¹⁷

In other words, the philosophers obtain only ignorance of God through philosophical reasoning, but the mystically aware scholars realize that all existence is one. They do not see God but rather see all things as being with God, coming to know things as they really are through mystical insight beyond philosophical reasoning. Thus, the philosophical scholastic should say, “No one other than God knows God.” But the mystical scholastic can say, “I know only God.” By virtue of learned ignorance (again, Ghazali speaks of it as a comprehension that comes from the inability to comprehend), one sees that what one had previously known through philosophical reasoning to be other than God is not other than God. There is nothing in existence other than God and God’s works. Ghazali thus calls us to view sky, earth, and trees not as they are but as they are with God—in the sense of having their origin in God and so always being with God. As one claims to see only the sun when beholding its rays stretching across the mountains, one can say, “I know only God and I see only God.” All things are lights and traces of God’s unfathomable power.¹⁸

This, of course, does not mean that what is said about God can transgress logic. Ghazali is critiquing philosophers for denying that revelation is the surest means of knowing God. Still, he affirms the power of philosophical logic, not to know God in reality, but to make partial conclusions about his names and attributes, some of which are knowable by philosophy, while others are known only by revelation. This results in a complex relation between logic and revelation. On the one hand, the way the Qur'an describes God cannot defy logic. For example, logically, we know that God cannot be limited by space or time. Thus, scriptural references to God in corporeal terms must be interpreted metaphorically. The Qur'an says God has a hand, but this is a logical absurdity if taken in a literal sense. However, the Qur'an says the world is created. Since this is not logically impossible, it has to be accepted in its literal sense as logically necessary. Since compelling arguments can be made for both the eternity and creation of the world, God's word is to be given the final say on the matter. The affairs of God that lie beyond the power of logic must be left to God to determine. By knowing that we cannot know things about God through logic, we are forced to admit the logical necessity of relying on prophetic instruction for knowledge of God. Ultimately, then, skepticism has cognitive value.

Moreover, even if logic can tell us that God as the source of creation exists and that such a source must be endowed with certain attributes, such as power, knowledge, life, and speech, nevertheless, logic cannot yield knowledge of these attributes in reality, let alone God's essence in reality. Humans might attempt to know them analogously by likening them to human characteristics: Humans, possessing the attributes of power, knowledge, life, and speech, imagine that the attributes apply to God as they do to humans, only more so. However, Ghazali notes, the fact that we know something about God's attributes by likening them (*tashbih*) to ourselves does not imply affinity (*munāsaba*) between humans and God. It is simply one way of knowing God, albeit a markedly deficient one. Thus, when it comes to the force of logic, we can never know God in reality: neither his essence nor his attributes.

For example, only God knows God's power in its true reality. We know it only as a name and attribute of God. Still, our knowledge of God's power increases in relation to our knowledge of the world, since it is in the world that we observe the effects (or results) of God's actions—his actions in creating the world. It is here that logic has a role in the process of acquiring knowledge of God. Philosophical method informs us of the workings of the world. The more we make use of it, the more we appreciate God's actions, since the world's affairs are the results of his actions.

However, one should not conclude that philosophy is able to offer knowledge of God in his true reality. Not even prophecy conveys knowledge of God in that sense. (The revelation of the Qur'an only makes allusions to the divine essence by describing it in a negative fashion, that is, by saying that there is nothing like God or by saying that God is beyond human descriptions.)¹⁹ Since philosophy is a way to obtain certain knowledge—and not

mere sense impressions—about the workings of the world, it is the means to increase one's knowledge of God's actions—or, more specifically, the results of his actions that reflect his attribute of power. The more we come to knowledge of the results of God's power, the more we appreciate its reality, even if we always fall short of grasping it fully. By reflecting on the workings of a well-ordered world, we conclude that its maker is necessarily a being with certain attributes, among them power, knowledge, and life, since a being without those attributes could not have made such a well-ordered world.²⁰

What about prophets and saintly friends of God? They, too, are not able to know God in reality, making it seem that nothing distinguishes their knowledge from that of philosophers. Ghazali addresses the question: A philosopher, if using logic properly, will obtain knowledge of God with the above limitations. Making deductions from his observations of the world's order, he will know that its maker is a being that is living, knowing, and powerful. The knowledge of the prophets and saints does not exceed this, but the difference lies in that fact that they do not only know these things, but they also *see* them. They see them as they really exist, that is, with God. They consider the wonders of God's signs in creation not simply by logic but with mystical insight. The difference, then, is one between knowing and seeing. Philosophers have certain knowledge of these things, but they do not see them.²¹

It is clear that philosophy, especially the philosophy of Avicenna, left a deep impact on Ghazali, pushing him to reconstruct the theological tradition of Sunni Islam more broadly so as to accommodate (one might say, contain) the logic of philosophy albeit without compromising God's revealed message. This is no less true for his understanding of prophecy. Ghazali affirms that prophecy is primarily a divine communiqué, not a natural even if rare instance of the human soul, but he still accepts philosophical assumptions about prophecy: Prophecy is a message from God, but its import and message cannot be obscure to the mind. The mind on its own power might not be able to come up with the knowledge of God as conveyed through revelation, but it is capable of making sense of it once it is revealed.

Here, we brush up against another side of Ghazali's skepticism: He affirms the meta-rational origins of prophecy but also insists on its rationality. As a result, he views prophets and philosophers through a single lens, but not exactly as Avicenna did. Even if influenced by Avicenna,²² Ghazali makes use of learned ignorance—and the resulting force of mystical insight along with that of logic—to conceive the scholastic project anew now within the framework of what he called the science of the other world (*'ilm al-ākhirā*). Ghazali was by no means abandoning scholasticism for mysticism. He was deeply troubled, it should be noted, by apparently irrational statements of mystics, such as the claim to be one with God. This made it necessary to ground the mystical experience in a recognizable method that was philosophically sound but still meta-rational. He was challenging the presumptions of philosophy but also grounding mysticism in scholasticism.

This is illustrated in the chapter on the love of God in *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*. Ghazali's goal is not simply to speak of the love of God but to educate his readers (presumably disciples) in the ways of mystical scholasticism, so as to see all things pleasurable and beautiful—and thus worthy of love—not as things in themselves but as traces of the power of God. One loves God because one does indeed see God since God is really the only existent. All things, including the smallest insect, should not be seen in themselves but rather insofar as they exist through (and thus with) the incomprehensible power of God—a way of knowing God that Ghazali associates, here too, with confusion (*ḥayra*). Indeed, in this chapter, he refers to learned ignorance, saying, “Glorified is God who provided for his creatures, as the only way to knowledge of him, the inability to know him.”²³

How does this happen? Over the course of the chapter, Ghazali gradually leads the reader to awareness that all that he loves in the world, all that he finds pleasurable and beautiful, all of this is really known only in relation to God. The argument is too complicated to detail here, but it is based on a kind of aesthetics and ethics. What we love for itself and not for any ulterior motive is beauty. For example, we find pleasure in gazing at green fields and running water not because we will eat or drink from them but because of the sheer pleasure in gazing upon their beauty. However, true beauty is a question of character. The attributes of attractive character, which is more compelling than physical beauty, are the result of three things: the knowledge that people of good character have of God, their power or ability to reform themselves and others, and their detachment from lowly passions and base lusts. However, Ghazali concludes, one should realize that the knowledge, power, and perfection of those with good character are nothing compared to God's knowledge, power, and perfection. In keeping with learned ignorance, he does not define what these attributes mean for God but suggests that they are infinitely incomprehensible. The point is not to define them but rather to explain them so as to make God the exclusive object of one's love. The gist of Ghazali's mystical scholasticism is captured in the following passages from the chapter on love:

All that exists in relation to the power of Allah the Exalted [*qudrat allāh ta'ālā*] is like shade in relation to the tree, light in relation to the sun; all things are the traces of his power [*āthār qudrathī*], and the existence of all belongs to his existence [*tābi' li-wujūdihi*]. ... Kindness from people can only be conceived metaphorically, for the one who is kind is Allah the Exalted [that is, God is the singular source of all qualities that are loved]. ... My goodness, who can deny that it is really possible to love Allah the Exalted? ... Who denies that these descriptions are the descriptions of beauty, perfection, and goodness ... and that they describe God? ... The closeness of the slave [that is, the human] to his Lord the Mighty and Majestic is in terms of attributes [not in terms of physical closeness], attributes which he is commanded to follow and the

characteristics of lordship [knowledge, righteousness, goodness, kindness, mercy, guidance, and so on] which he is commanded to emulate. ... All the regions of the realm [*malakūt*] of the heavens and the earth are the domain of the knower who takes his place therein as he wishes. ... He who has awareness [*ma'rifa*] of Allah the Praiseworthy, to him will be disclosed the mysteries of the realm [*mulk*] of Allah, even a little bit, and upon this disclosure, he will be struck in his heart with joy that will almost make him fly. ... This is among the things that are comprehended only by taste [*dhawq*, that is, mystical scholasticism as opposed to philosophical scholasticism].²⁴

Reasoned reflection on God's creation

This is not to make light of the knowledge of God that can be obtained through philosophical inquiry into the workings of the world, but such knowledge falls short of that obtained from mystical insight. Knowledge of God in relation to the physical world comes about as a result of effort. One has to work at it. In contrast, knowledge of God from mystical insight is in part a divine initiative whereby the "light" of the mind is further illuminated by the "light" of prophecy. Nevertheless, knowledge of God through philosophical inquiry into the workings of the world is a vital part of Ghazali's system and has a claim on the minds of all believers, especially learned ones with reservations about the rationality of revelation. It is not knowledge of God of the kind revealed to prophets and beheld by saints through mystical disclosure. It is, rather, the result of intellectual contemplation (*tafakkur*) of the workings of the universe, which are but the results of God's actions in creating it. The mind apprehends them as part of the created order and, on that basis, derives knowledge about God. Ghazali wrote a treatise, *The Wisdom in God's Creations*, to encourage people to pursue knowledge in this fashion:

Praise to Allah who made intellectual contemplation [*tafakkur*] of the things he made a means by which to ground certainty in the hearts of those of his slaves [that is, humans] who have perception [that is, the intelligent]. By means of *tafakkur* they derive knowledge of the Praiseworthy One [that is, God] in his attribute [of power], and so they know him, verifying that there is no god but he and declaring his oneness. By witnessing his greatness and majesty [via philosophical inquiry into the things of the world], they declare him to be transcendent. He is the one who bestows just measure on all conditions. They [that is, those who use the mind in this way] are witnesses to that through rational inquiry [*naẓar*] and rational deduction [*istidlāl*], by which they come to know that he is wise, powerful, and possessed of knowledge. The path to knowledge of Allah the Praiseworthy comes about by exalting him for his creations, contemplating the wonders of his constructions, and understanding the wisdom in his inventions.²⁵

In the remainder of the book, Ghazali details the wonders of God's creation: sky, sun, moon, planets, earth, sea, water, air, fire, humans, birds, beasts, insects, fish, and plants. All of this is meant to foster contemplation of the created (as opposed to otherworldly) order of things. Knowledge of the otherworldly (or ultimate) reality of things comes with mystical insight made possible by prophetic revelation, whereas intellectual contemplation is based on the logic of philosophy, whereby God is apprehended indirectly through contemplation of his creation.

As indirect knowledge of God, it does not offer knowledge of God in reality, only knowledge of the results of his actions. Here, then, logical inquiry is applicable, even obligatory. One is to examine the workings of the world on their own terms without explaining them as direct interventions by God, and knowledge of God can be obtained in this way. No recourse to the miraculous is needed. The world, it can be seen from rational observation, works according to its own system of causality.

The knowledge of God in question here is the fruit of philosophy, but prophecy, too, has a share in it, since God taught logic to the prophets. When it comes to this kind of knowledge, prophets and philosophers are alike, even if prophets receive it effortlessly whereas philosophers have to work at it. In sum, we are dealing with two ways of knowing God, mystical insight and philosophical inquiry, and prophecy pertains to both, albeit in different ways: Prophecy makes mystical insight possible, but it also has a share in philosophically obtained knowledge of God, namely, the attributes of the creator that necessarily follow from examination of the creation, since those are the very things prophecy describes.

Later in this same work, *The Wisdom in God's Creations*, in a section on the nobility of the mind,²⁶ Ghazali notes the limitations of philosophical inquiry. The mind, as explained above, can acquire some knowledge of God even if it is unable to know him in reality. This means that the mind is not limited to the physical realm but can peer, as it were, into the otherworldly realm. This is because the mind is metaphysical in nature: Even if drawing upon data obtained by the senses, the mind has no direct experiences of its own at the level of the senses. For this reason, it is disposed to knowledge of the metaphysical world: realities beyond physical appearances. Thus, on the basis of what it deduces from the physical world, the mind, which is not limited to the physical realm, can grasp the existence of things that lie beyond the senses. It is thus because of the mind that one believes in the existence of metaphysical realities that are hidden from it by the veils of God.

In this sense, the mind can reach the edge of the otherworldly realm, and yet it is unable to know itself ('*ājiz 'an ma'rifat nafsihi*). Here, Ghazali alludes to the many ways in which the mind, even if it knows that it exists, does not know the particulars of its own identity. For this, it must surrender itself to the One with knowledge of it, *acknowledging its ignorance of itself* (*muqir bi-l-jahl bi-nafsihi*).

The mind is able to examine the subtle matters and intricate aspects of creation, and it can even deduce that it is created and therefore limited.

However, this limitation keeps it from self-knowledge through its own power: When it wants to remember something, it forgets it. When it wants to forget something, it remembers it. When it wants to be happy, it becomes sad. All of this is evidence that the mind is *ignorant of the truths of what it knows* (*jāhil bi-ḥaqā'iq mā 'alima*). The mind can know the realities of so many things, from the details of the created order to universal standards of ethics common to all nations. However, even if this knowledge elevates humans above animals, there is a kind of knowledge nobler than anything the mind might know on its own apart from prophetic instruction. This knowledge consists of the rules of the metaphysical realm, as Ghazali explains:

Consider how Allah has ennobled the human being, creating it to benefit from this knowledge [as acquired by the mind]. Vessels are ennobled by their contents. The heart of the slave [that is, the human being], as the site for knowledge of Allah the Praiseworthy, is ennobled by it. Moreover, Allah the Praiseworthy in his foreknowledge planned for his human creatures a final destiny in a realm other than this one, but he did not create for them a faculty in their minds by which to know the rules of that realm. He therefore perfected this light that he gave to them, namely, the light of the intellect, with the light of the divine message, and so sent the prophets, Allah's prayers upon them, with good news to the obedient and a warning to the disobedient, granting them revelation, and preparing them to receive it. The light of this revelation from Allah in relation to the light of the intellect is like the sun in relation to the light of the stars, and so they [the prophets] guide the slaves [that is, humans] to their interests in this world *in those areas that their minds alone could not grasp* [*fīmā la tastiḳill bi-idrākihi 'uqūlulum*]; and also guided them to their interests in the other world, which humans cannot know without the mediation of prophets. God showed humans evidence of the truth of the message brought by the prophets in the reports about them, the truth of which one is obliged by logic to accept.²⁷

The logic of skepticism

Ghazali, across the corpus of his writings, repeatedly alludes to a particular kind of skepticism: the extraordinary power of the human mind but also its limitations and even ignorance. This is not the confusion of the mystics, as seen in chapter one, beginning with Junayd. Rather, Ghazali is suggesting that knowledge operates according to two sets of rules, one for the physical realm, where logic holds, and one for the otherworldly realm, where mystical insight is needed. But the philosophers are ignorant of the otherworldly realm, as defined by Ghazali, even if their methods bring them close to it, making him skeptical of the claims of philosophers to know things of the otherworldly realm with certainty. There, the causality, on the basis of which philosophical

inquiry into the created order makes sense, does not necessarily apply. Rather, God directly determines things by means of his speech (conveyed via prophecy), making him the immediate cause of the mystical knowledge that Ghazali seeks to advance. In contrast, the physical realm, even if the result of God's actions, is sufficiently removed from God (not in terms of space but in terms of existence) to make secondary causality possible and even necessary. Here, God does not directly intervene. A causal order exists on its own terms, making it possible to derive knowledge about it through philosophical inquiry, which can yield knowledge of God that is certain because it is based on proof, not hearsay, even if it falls short of the mystical knowledge that comes from inquiry into things by *starting* from God, a method made possible by learned ignorance and fulfilled by revelation, which attunes the mind to the otherworld.

Ghazali has thus succeeded in demonstrating the truth of prophecy while also accepting the truth of philosophy. In this fashion, he has domesticated the achievements of philosophy, especially those of Avicenna, within the theological parameters of Islam. But in so doing, he has to reconfigure those parameters, placing the logic of philosophy at the heart of Islam! This is not to redefine philosophy. Rather, by claiming logic for Islam, he seeks to show that the philosophers are not being sufficiently philosophical. In his view, they only parrot the teachings of the past masters, such as Avicenna, whereas philosophy, to be true, requires independent thinking. Philosophers should emulate no one, heeding only the conclusions of compelling proofs.²⁸ Thus, with the intention of teaching the philosophers a philosophical lesson, Ghazali set out to build a surer foundation not so much for Islam but rather for logic. With him, it is not a question of using the logic of Aristotle to demonstrate the rationality of Islam's teachings, as it had been with 'Amiri, but rather of aligning Islam's teachings with the methods of logic. The result is a mixture of philosophy and prophecy, the coherency of which is at times difficult to pin down.

This can be seen in a chapter from *The Revivification of Religious Sciences* that treats the topic of reasoned reflection (*tafakkur*), which, as seen earlier, Ghazali identifies as the process of obtaining knowledge of God through intellectual contemplation of his creation. The term occurs in the Qur'an, where it is used to call people to consider the order of the world as a sign of God's power: The idea is that knowledge of God results from reflection on the world. Here, in his magnum opus, Ghazali defines the term more precisely, equating it with syllogistic reasoning, where two premises (he refers to them as two pieces of knowledge) necessarily lead to a conclusion (he refers to it as a third piece of knowledge). To illustrate, he poses a question about the purpose of existence. Do we live for this world or for the other world?

So many people truly know that the other world is the better choice, but when asked for the reason, they cannot explain why they know it to be the better choice unless their knowledge of this truth is the result of two

prior pieces of knowledge: first, that what is more enduring is a better choice, and, second, that the other world is more enduring than this one. A third piece of knowledge results, namely, that the other world is the better choice. The product of true thinking occurs when two pieces of knowledge lead to a third.²⁹

By identifying a scriptural term, *tafakkur*, with syllogistic reasoning, Ghazali is following in the footsteps of 'Amiri, who, it will be remembered from the last chapter, equated God's pen with universal rationality and the heavenly tablet with the world soul. Here, Ghazali tightens the connection between scripture and philosophy. By virtue of syllogistic reasoning, now conceived as a scriptural category (*tafakkur*), one can know with certainty that it is better to choose the other world over this one. This knowledge, now certain because syllogistically derived, becomes a light to illuminate the heart. The impact of this knowledge on the heart, in turn, leads to a transformation in one's limbs, which respond by acting in the service of a transformed heart. In other words, because one has certainty that the other world is better, one will not hesitate to act for it, renouncing this world and its fleeting pleasures. The process, connecting knowledge and action, can be summed up as follows: What one does depends on the state of one's heart; the state of one's heart depends on certain knowledge; and certain knowledge depends on syllogistic thinking. For Ghazali, then, it is by the force of logic that Islam would be revived.

Ghazali is pressing a very important point, one relating to his engagement with philosophers, namely, that people will not do something if they have doubts about its veracity. Doubt can lead to indifference. Why act in the name of Islam if I am not certain about its claims? This was the crisis that in Ghazali's view the philosophers had provoked. By claiming certainty for philosophy over Islam, they had made it difficult for the learned to feel compelled to act in the name of Islam. Why follow prophetic instruction if I have doubts about its fundamental claims? Can I accept it as authoritative if the certain knowledge I have about God comes from philosophy rather than prophecy? This, for Ghazali, threatened the moral life of Islam, which is based on prophetic instruction. There could be no moral life apart from the revealed teachings of Islam. It was thus not only Islam's beliefs about God that were threatened by philosophy: The greater threat was to the virtuous life in Islam, which, after all, was the reason why one pursued knowledge in the first place.

For this reason, in his analysis of contemplation (*tafakkur*) in *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*, Ghazali likens the syllogism to fire that ignites when steel is struck by flint. Two premises, brought together, create a conclusion that, like a spark of fire, produces light for one to see where before one was blind, and to be roused to virtuous action where before one was enslaved to the ways of the world. Ghazali is not always a philosopher but he does draw on syllogistic reasoning, the method of certainty, to develop a

theory of action. His ultimate goal is to get people to be virtuous by showing them that they can follow the teachings of Islam with the certainty of demonstrable proof. He is making every effort to use the achievements of philosophy to imbue the umma with a sense of certainty and inspire it to act for the other world. Philosophy does not determine knowledge of God but rather brings people to a point of certainty about the knowledge of God as revealed by Islam. Once there, once they have attained certainty with the help of philosophy, they will act accordingly for the otherworldly purposes of Islam.

The logic of prophecy

The close relation in Ghazali's thought between philosophy and the revealed purposes of Islam made it necessary to show that the logic of philosophy is the very thing the Qur'an teaches. In other words, logic, as revealed by the Qur'an, is the means to move beyond this world of senses and images to the truths of the other world. The mind guides us, by its ability to think logically, to the light of God as revealed by prophecy. Logic is not the light of God. But by moving us beyond the senses and images of this world, it helps to prepare us for the light of God, leading us to a point where we are disposed to receive the divine communiqué of the Qur'an.

Ghazali spells this out in the introduction to a work on logic, *The Standard of Knowledge*, where he discusses three ways of knowing.³⁰ We know things from sense impressions. We know things by the images we retain of them in our mind. And we know things by the rational power of our mind. The first two (senses and images) are problematic: Knowledge obtained from sense impressions and the images we retain of them in our mind are too close to worldly appearances. And since appearances can deceive us if not subjected to the mind's oversight, knowledge based only on senses and images necessarily falls short of certainty. Ghazali refers to these two ways of knowing as satanic! The third way, via the mind, operates at a distance from the world. It is angelic because it is not directly connected to this world. However, the faculty of reasoning is connected to the faculties by which we sense things in the physical world and retain images of them in the mind. The mind relies upon them for data from which it derives premises, premises on the basis of which it draws necessary conclusions. The mind therefore is not to be unduly influenced by these two lower faculties. It might depend on them for the object of its inquiry, but if it were to fall under their sway, it would become rusty, like a mirror, losing its ability to reflect (that is, reach certainty of) the things presented to it. It is therefore important to be devoted to the philosophical approaches to knowledge. By training in philosophy, one polishes the mirror of one's heart so that it better reflect the light of God, which, we will see, is all that really exists according to Ghazali.

Philosophy thus works in close tandem with prophecy for a single purpose, namely, certain knowledge of God and action in accordance with it. This

means that logic is not merely at the service of Islam. It is actually the product of Islam. Ghazali makes this point in *The Just Balance*,³¹ a work in which he knits together the rules of logic with verses of the Qur'an in the form of a debate with a follower of the imam of Isma'ilism. He refers to this work in his autobiography, *Deliverance from Error*, claiming that it contains criteria by which to resolve the disagreements among the various sects of Islam.³² All will agree to it, Ghazali argues, since it is based on five scales revealed by God in the Qur'an. These scales turn out to be forms of logic known from Greek philosophy.³³ Ghazali actually admits that he is creating new terms for these forms out of verses from the Qur'an.³⁴ Since he admits this, even if he does not actually use the term for logic (*mantiq*), it cannot be said that he is covertly seeking to make the philosophical method acceptable to people of piety. His goal, rather, is to elevate the minds of believers beyond senses and images. This is achieved, at least initially, by training in logic. But since most people are weak-minded, Ghazali is compelled to teach them logic through things immediately familiar to them, namely, stories from the Qur'an. By making scripture the source of logic, he has found a way for the minds of believers to ascend to God beyond the senses and images of this world.³⁵ It proceeds by logic but also through scripture.

Over the course of the book, he explains the various types of syllogistic reasoning that the Qur'an teaches. For example, in Ghazali's hands, the encounter between Abraham and Nimrod as narrated in the Qur'an becomes a lesson in logic. Nimrod claims he is divine, a claim Abraham rejects with the counterclaim that Nimrod cannot make the sun appear. It is a story of prophetic defiance of worldly arrogance, but Ghazali draws out the syllogistic nature of the encounter, turning Abraham into a master of logic. He reformulates the narrative as two premises from which a conclusion necessarily follows: One, whoever makes the sun appear is God. Two, God makes the sun appear, not Nimrod. Therefore, Abraham's God is God, since Abraham's God makes the sun appear, while Nimrod manifestly does not.

This is not to turn the Qur'an into a textbook on logic. It is not Ghazali's purpose to equate prophecy with philosophy. Rather, he seeks to highlight a rigorous method of reasoning as illustrated in the Qur'an. This, in turn, provides a criterion (logic) for certain knowledge of God. Amidst the back-and-forth repartee with the follower of the imam of Isma'ilism, Ghazali draws forth the implications of this criterion of knowledge, logic as derived from the Qur'an. His purpose is thus twofold. He shows that syllogistic reasoning comes from the Qur'an, and building upon this, he illustrates how one is to use it to obtain certain knowledge of God.

This is exactly what he does: By joining two premises together to reach a conclusion, he gradually shows that one can know the truths of God by force of logic and not simply by accepting them on the authority of another, a method that does not yield certainty. For example, at one point, Ghazali posits that the human being is the result of a cause. It is not its own cause. This, he explains, is because the human being has a size that is not necessary.

(Here, he is tapping into the distinction between necessary and possible knowledge as discussed in the last chapter.) God could have created humans taller or shorter without compromising their human essence. There is nothing necessary about the size of the human being. It could be taller or shorter and still be human. This means that the human being belongs to the realm of possibility. It could have existed in this form or that one. Thus, as possible, its existence cannot be said to be necessary. And since it exists in one form but could have existed in another one, there had to have been a force—a maker—that gave it its form. It is thus proved by syllogistic reasoning that the human being is not its own maker: The first premise is that everything that belongs to the realm of possibility has a cause. The second premise is that humans belong to the realm of possibility. The logically necessary conclusion is that humans have a cause or maker.

Building on this, Ghazali goes on to demonstrate, also by syllogistic reasoning, that this maker is knowledgeable, has life, and is self-subsistent (*qā'im bi-nafsihi*). His point is to illustrate how one can ascend from knowledge of the attributes of the human being to knowledge of the attributes of its maker, and ascend from there to knowledge of its essence. (Knowledge of God's essence here refers to what can be known about God's essence by force of logic, not what can be known about it by mystical insight.) Ghazali calls this a spiritual ascension (*mi'rāj*), using the term for the night journey of the Prophet to the throne of God.³⁶ The scales, that is, the forms of syllogistic reasoning known from the Qur'an, are the ladders by which to ascend to heaven and then to the creator of heaven, while its premises are the rungs of the ladders. Through logic, one ascends from the physical to the metaphysical realm where the truths of things are manifest.³⁷ Logic helps one get to a point where one can see things as they are. One ascends to knowledge of God through logic, but it is a logic that comes from the Qur'an. With Ghazali, philosophy and prophecy are woven together into a single web of certain knowledge of God.

However, not all logic is godly. It is on the basis of faulty logic that one is led to submit to a false imam. Ghazali notes that the missionaries of Isma'ilism exploit the theological chaos of the day to make a pseudo-logical argument of their own.³⁸ It runs as follows: Truth is one, but theological disputation only results in a multiplicity of truth claims. In contrast, truth is one with those who follow the divine instruction of the imam. Therefore, knowledge of God is obtained not by theological disputation but from the imam's instruction. However intelligent humans may be, the follower of the imam claims, they invariably disagree. Thus, without a figure to provide divine instruction, humanity would be lost. This, however, would be to mock God. It would be absurd to believe that God would send a message only to leave believers hopelessly divided over its meaning. Hence, the imam must exist.

Ghazali is quick to note the error of this logic: It is as if to say that because white and black are both colors, they are the same color; or that because the

sun, like God, is greater than anything else, the sun, like God, is also God. Such reasoning, Ghazali says, comes not from the Qur'an but from Satan! The true method of knowing God comes from a combination of rational inquiry and divine instruction, but for Ghazali divine instruction is the teachings of the Prophet, exclusively, not the imam. Just as one cannot see without eyesight and sunlight, so, too, the mind comes to knowledge of God by following the logic illustrated by the Qur'an. The problem with Isma'ilism, according to Ghazali, is not so much that its teachings are false. They may or may not be. Rather, the problem is that one accepts them blindly. How, therefore, can one be certain that they are true? As Ghazali warns his opponent, if you follow the imam, you will end up like the Jews and Christians, who made lords out of their leaders, submitting to their teachings without verifying them.

It is hardly coincidental that in this work Ghazali makes his opponent a follower of the imam. His goal in general is to move believers with rational inclinations from blind acceptance of beliefs to certain knowledge of them by acquainting them with logic. Over the course of the book, as Ghazali outlines the system of logic that he has derived from the Qur'an, we see the follower of the imam gradually coming to greater comprehension of what he believes.³⁹ It is not that his previous knowledge of God, based on what he had heard from the infallible imam, is necessarily wrong. Rather, since he got it on hearsay, he cannot claim to know it with certainty. It is only logic that brings about certainty. It is thus logic that makes the infallible imam superfluous. Muslims have the tools to obtain certain knowledge of God without taking recourse to such a figure. God's message conveyed by prophecy, combined with the force of logic, is all one needs. But Ghazali's opponent protests: Ghazali is the one who has formulated the decisive criterion by which to judge all knowledge. Has he not awarded himself the stature of infallible imam?

It is as if you are claiming the imamate for yourself exclusively. What is your proof? My imam performs a miracle to attest to his claim, and he also has been designated as imam through a line of succession from his forebears, the imams before him. Where is your designation? Where is your miracle? Ghazali said: I permit others to share this knowledge with me. You can learn it from others as you do from me. I do not limit true teaching to myself. There are two ways we might understand the meaning of imam. We might mean the one who learns from Allah the Exalted through the mediation of the Angel Gabriel. I do not claim this for myself. Or we might mean the one who learns from Allah and the Angel Gabriel by the mediation of the Apostle Muhammad. I do claim the imamate for myself in this sense—learning from the Apostle Muhammad and not from the Angel Gabriel.⁴⁰

Ghazali has not received knowledge directly from God as a prophet would, but he seems to be claiming the mantle of prophecy. He is not saying that he

is a prophet, but only that he is prophet-like, since he has the means for people to know God with certainty and not merely on the authority of others. This, however, does not make him unique. All have the potential to become prophet-like in this sense through the use of logic. Here, too, his point is that logic will help us know the truths of God as prophets—now recast as expert logicians—know them. Ghazali is not speaking here of the knowledge of God that comes from mystical insight. However, since the Qur'an, now author of logic, mediates the experience of mystical insight, it also has a relation to philosophy. It is not that the visions of the saints in their mystical disclosures amount to syllogistic reasoning. Rather, syllogistic reasoning prepares the mind for mystical insight. Mystical insight may be ineffable, conveying knowledge that cannot be communicated in words or conceived as ideas, but it has a cognitive basis insofar as it is made possible by the prophetic message, which, as just seen, is also the source of the syllogistic reasoning undergirding all knowledge. And, as will be remembered, it is reasoning that brings one to learned ignorance, which, in turn, allows for knowledge of things in reality—as they exist with God.

If it is all so clear, his opponent queries, why has it had so little impact? Why are not all convinced by this scripturally based criterion of truth that Ghazali has discovered? Ghazali is confident that he has the keys to certainty, but he has no illusions about winning over all people. Not all heeded the prophets in their day, he says. Why should he expect people to heed him? Humans, Ghazali claims, have been created to disagree, a claim placed in the epigraph of this chapter; disagreement is part of God's plan to keep the true realities of things veiled to most people:

Can you, his opponent asks, teach all things that are true and can be known about God to all people, eliminating the disagreements that occur among them? Ghazali said: I cannot. [He continues:] Has your infallible imam, until now, been able to end the disagreements of people and eliminate all ambiguity from their hearts? When were the prophets able to remove all disagreement? Indeed, *disagreement among humans is decreed for all time of necessity*.⁴¹

Is Ghazali simply trying to justify why the umma is not riveted by his incredible breakthroughs? People do not listen to prophets or prophet-like scholars such as Ghazali because they have been destined for disagreement by divine design. One can detect a note of frustration in Ghazali's words, but something more is at play. Disagreement is something that God has decreed, making it a feature of human existence *of necessity*. People do not disagree simply because they fail to heed prophets and prophet-like scholars but because God has foreordained the existence of mutually contradictory points of view. Does this not make Ghazali a follower of "the equivalence of evidence," the slogan of skeptics as seen in the last chapter? Ghazali is no beacon of theological tolerance,⁴² but he does seek to find space within Islam

for a variety of viewpoints that seem contradictory on the surface, as seen earlier in terms of divine predestination and human freewill. To be sure, it is his method that yields true knowledge, not that of the philosophers or missionaries of the imam, but he does allow for some theological variety within Islam. This is not to dilute the faith but rather to suggest that a divided umma is actually laboring towards a single purpose. This unity in diversity is due to the fact that believers operate at different levels of existence, resulting in different ways of knowing God. For some, it is enough to hear the words of the Qur'an. Others need the persuasion of theological discourse. Still others are satisfied only with demonstrable proof.

Philosophy condemned?

In light of the foregoing, we can better understand Ghazali's famous critique of philosophy in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.⁴³ In line with his overall vision, his issue is by no means with the philosophical method itself but rather with the fact that philosophers are not sufficiently skeptical about what can be known about God with certainty by the philosophical method. As he demonstrated in other works, the philosophical method should result in admission of one's ignorance of God. In this work, Ghazali attacks the methodological presumptions of the philosophers more so than their positions, just as he did with the follower of the infallible imam in *The Just Balance*. He gives special attention to three claims made by philosophers. The first is their claim that the world is eternal, not created in time. The second is their claim that God knows only universal principles and therefore is not cognizant of the particular affairs of his creation. The third is their denial of the resurrection of the body on Judgment Day; only the immaterial soul is immortal. For Ghazali, the problem was not merely that these positions conflict with the teachings of Islam. This, to be sure, was a problem, since it was to accuse the Prophet of lying, making Islam nothing more than a convenient myth for popular consumption. If not sequestered within elite circles, philosophy would destroy the moral fabric of Muslim society. But there was a deeper problem, namely, the claim of philosophers to have reached these positions by force of logic. This was to claim that their ideas about God were not simply possibly true. They were true *of necessity*.

For Ghazali, this was to go too far even by all standards of logic. In his view, philosophers, not unlike followers of the infallible imam, were guilty of faulty logic, failing to distinguish between things that belonged to the realm of possible knowledge and those that belonged to the realm of necessary knowledge.⁴⁴ There are some things that we know of necessity: It is impossible for a person to sit and stand at the same time, and the whole is necessarily greater than any of its parts. Other things fall under the category of possible knowledge. Your neighbor might be at home, or he might not be. You cannot know with certainty until you go to his house to verify whether or not he is actually at home. Only then does knowledge of his whereabouts become necessary, requiring all people with a mind to accept it.

The same is true of the things of God. We can know some things about God of necessity; here Ghazali would agree with the philosophers. For example, by force of logic, we can know that there is one god, not many in mutual opposition; that he exists from eternity and is not created by another; and that he is not limited by space and time. However, other aspects of God fall into the realm of possibility. God may have formed the world from eternity, or he may have created it in time. There are good arguments for both. God may have knowledge of the particular affairs of his creation, or he may know only universal principles. There are good arguments for both. He may make the body rise to join the soul in the next life, or he may not. There are good arguments for both. It is acceptable to have reservations when faced with equally compelling but mutually contradictory positions. Such matters cannot be settled by force of logic but belong to the domain of possible knowledge. They could be one way. They could be another. Logic is not conclusive.

This does not mean we are to wallow in ignorance of God and God's ways. Just as we cannot know by logic whether our neighbor is at home but must go to his house to check, so, too, there is another way of obtaining knowledge about God where doubt persists, namely, prophetic instruction. Prophecy informs us of the things of God that we cannot know by force of logic, turning what is possible knowledge about God into necessary knowledge. Whereas the mind offers two possibilities, now, with prophecy, a message from God, we can know the truth. What was possible knowledge now becomes, by virtue of prophecy, necessary. Since the mind alone cannot reach conclusions on such matters as the three noted above, prophecy must step in to tilt the balance in favor of one position over another. When it comes to debates about the creation of the world, God's knowledge of particulars, and the resurrection of the body, the mind is confused, but prophecy brings clarity.

Ghazali may have accused the philosophers of overstepping the bounds of logic, but they, of course, did not think they had. Too much was at stake. In their view, it would be the demise of the intellect if we could not know the mind of God by force of logic. It was the mind of God that had created the world and made it work the way it did. Thus, if we cannot know God's mind with the certainty of demonstrable proof, we cannot know anything with certainty. In other words, if the logic we use to derive knowledge of the things of the world does not reflect the mind of its maker in some measure, we cannot be certain that we know the things of the world as God does—that is, that we know things as they really are.

The issue at stake was the causality of the universe. Philosophers based their knowledge of things on their natures. We know the things of the world according to their natures. Horses run, they do not fly, because it is in their nature to run, while it is not in their nature to fly. Humans do not walk through material objects because it is not in their nature to do so. They open the door before walking through the doorway. And fire burns cotton because

it is in the nature of cotton to burn when it comes into contact with fire. We can thus grasp the causal nexus of the world by examining the natures of things. However, to say this is to assume that we can know the workings of the divine mind (that is, the true reality of God) as they really are, that we can know things as God knows them, that is, as they really are, and not merely as they appear to our minds. To know the reality of things, one has to know the mind of their maker, and to know it by rational inquiry, not meta-rationally by revelation.

Without the assumption that we can know things as God does, we would be left with nothing but appearances, uncertain about the real workings of the world. We would have to accept that things might not happen according to their natures but according to the inscrutable mind of God. We could never be certain that we know the natures of things in reality. Horses do not fly *not* because it is not in their nature not to fly, humans do not walk through material objects *not* because it is not in their nature to do so, and cotton burns when it comes in contact with fire *not* because it is in its nature to do so. There is no *necessary* connection between horses and not flying, between humans and not walking through material objects, and between cotton and burning as a result of contact with fire. This was the view of the theological school to which Ghazali belonged, Ash'arism. There is only one causal agent in the world, namely God. God is the lord of his creation, not a system of cause and effect. (Juwayni, Ghazali's teacher, nuanced but did not change this position.) The universe may operate in a customary fashion, making it seem that things necessarily act according to their natures, but in reality it is the will of God that makes things happen.⁴⁵ There is no causal nexus to the universe, only God pulling the levers. This was anathema to philosophers, since it means that we cannot know anything by rational inquiry. There would be no rules by which to obtain certainty about the workings of the world. We would be left to consider the world not by rational inquiry but through guesswork. Things might be one way today, and another way tomorrow. It is not a horse's nature but God's will that makes it run. It is not the nature of fire but God's will that makes the cotton burn. Humans could know things only as they appear to be, not as they really are. There would be no point to undertake science.

Ghazali is by no means opposed to the scientific enterprise. As seen above, for him, we can know something about the power of God through philosophical inquiry into the workings of the world, which are the results of his actions in creating the world. Nevertheless, Ghazali calls for ignorance when it comes to the workings of the world, not the workings of the world in themselves but rather the workings of the world in terms of their relation to God. It is a fine line: We can acquire knowledge of God through philosophical examination of the world, but such knowledge does not determine God's relation to the world. In other words, philosophical examination of the world cannot result in necessary knowledge of God, that is, knowledge of God in reality, only possible knowledge of God. This, in turn, raises questions of our

knowledge of things in reality. If we cannot know anything about the source of being (that is, God) through philosophical inquiry, how can we know anything with certainty, also through philosophical inquiry, about the beings that originate in that source? Knowledge of the reality of creation is greatly jeopardized as a result of our ignorance of its originating source. We cannot know the reality of creatures if we cannot know the reality of their creator. Thus, logic should lead philosophers to admit that they cannot know, through the philosophical method, the nature of God's relation to the world. After all, he need not have created it in the first place. The three issues above (the creation of the world as opposed to its eternity; God's knowledge of the particulars of the world in addition to universal principles; and the resurrection of bodies along with their immortal souls) all fall under the category of God's relation to the world. No one, not even Avicenna, can claim to know with certainty the reality of God's relation to the world when it comes to these and similar issues. Such knowledge can be determined only by revelation.

Ghazali is not attacking philosophy wholesale. He is not even attacking it for its positions on these three issues. (His own positions on these issues are influenced by philosophy but still preserve the positions of Ash'arism.)⁴⁶ His point in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* is that philosophy cannot obtain necessary knowledge about God's relation to the world. Philosophy, when it comes to God's relation to the world, can at best propose possibilities. Ghazali is not arguing that the positions of the philosophers are wrong, only that they cannot claim certainty for them by force of logic apart from prophetic instruction. Thus, by deploying logic to undermine the positions of philosophers, Ghazali is claiming that philosophers are guilty of faulty logic. In other words, he uses logic to show the limits of logic when it comes to knowledge of God's relation to the world. In that regard, logic can only make possible conclusions, not necessary ones. For certainty, a method is needed other than that of philosophical scholasticism. The positions of the philosophers may be correct, but because of their faulty logic, these positions remain at the level of opinion, falling short of the status of certainty. Indeed, if philosophers knew how to use logic correctly as illustrated by Ghazali in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, they would realize that the mind is considerably limited when it comes to knowledge of God's relation to the world that he created.

However, as noted earlier, for Ghazali, this ignorance is actually a kind of knowledge, informing us that we need something more than logic, namely, prophetic instruction, to obtain certain knowledge of God's relation to the world. The mind alone cannot reach a decision when faced with equally compelling but mutually contradictory arguments about God's relation to the world. It becomes paralyzed in the face of the equivalence of evidence: for and against the creation of the world, for and against God's knowledge of the particular details of the world in addition to universal principles, for and against the resurrection of the body.

To resolve the conundrum, Ghazali demotes these questions to the level of possible knowledge. From the perspective of the human mind, both positions

can be true. That is, the matter cannot be decisively settled by philosophy. We need another way of knowing in order to be able to determine which of the two possible positions is true. This is the role of prophetic instruction. It is prophetic instruction that tilts the balance in favor of one possibility over another, pushing it onto the grounds of certain knowledge, that is, knowledge of things as they really are. Logic may have brought the mind to the point of recognizing its need for another way of knowing the affairs of God, but it can go no further on its own. God determines the truths of his relation to his creation, not philosophers. But this, again, does not mean one turns off one's mind in contemplating the universe. Rather, thanks to prophecy, one can undertake inquiry into the reality of the world by *starting* from God, rather than by starting from creation and trying to reason to God. In short, a shift in method has occurred, mystical scholasticism, allowing us to know things as they really are.

All of this left its mark on Ghazali's understanding of scripture.⁴⁷ Scripture turns into necessities what the mind can only know as possibilities. When the Qur'an addresses issues that the mind cannot know through its own power, such as creation and resurrection, it is incumbent on the mind to accept what the Qur'an says in its literal wordings as necessary knowledge. This applies to the learned elite no less than the ignorant masses. Admitting their ignorance, philosophers, too, have to rely on prophetic instruction for knowledge of God. However, there are some things that the mind can know about God on its own power, for example, that God cannot have a hand. To have a hand is to have a body. This would be to limit God spatially. Thus, when the Qur'an refers to the hand of God, the human, as rational, is not to accept its literal wordings. Here, Ghazali agrees with the philosophers, but one should not go too far. The Qur'an as a whole is not a metaphor, as philosophers would claim, but discloses truths that the mind on its own cannot determine.

Ghazali concludes *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*: If you are learned but deny what the Qur'an says on the three matters above, you are being stubbornly illogical by claiming certainty for what is only logically possible and cannot be resolved without a message from God. This makes you a heretic not by the declaration of religious authorities but by demonstrable proof! Philosophers deny that the world is created in time, that God has knowledge of the particular details of human affairs, and that bodies will be resurrected. But it has been shown that these matters belong to the realm of possibility at least as far as reasoning is concerned. The only logical choice is to leave the matter to God to determine through revelation. Philosophers thus have no logical grounds to question the core tenets of Islam. If they persist in doing so, they should be put to death as a fitting punishment for those who pose a logically unnecessary threat to the moral order of Islam.

Philosophical prophecy

Although frustrated with the philosophers, Ghazali did not set out to condemn them, only to put them in their proper place. His goal is to make

philosophy part of the domain of Islam, fashioning a system of thought that could be called philosophical prophecy. But he, too, does not escape contradiction. The mind, he maintains, is unable to say that there is anything necessary about God's relation to the world. But philosophical inquiry into the workings of the world does allow us to draw necessary conclusions about its maker. God could not have created the world if not possessed of power, knowledge, volition, and life. A powerless, ignorant, lifeless deity with no volition of its own could not create much at all. Also, God could not govern his creation if not possessed of sight, hearing, and speech. A deaf, dumb, and blind deity would be greatly handicapped in that regard. However, while logic tells us that God has these attributes, it cannot be concluded that the law of cause and effect applies to them. There is nothing binding on God in this regard. In contrast, it is logically necessary for him to be one, eternal, and non-corporeal, but these attributes apply to his essence, not to his relation to the world. Logically, God would still be one, eternal, and non-corporeal even if he had not created the world.

To speak of God's relation to the world is to speak of possibility. From the viewpoint of humans, nothing can be said to be logically necessary in that regard. It is thus up to God to inform the mind of the nature of his relation to the world. Where the mind only sees possibilities, God determines which of them is necessarily true. Here lies the contradiction. To make philosophy part of Islam, Ghazali had to argue that the mind ascends to knowledge of God through philosophical inquiry into the things of the world. In this sense, the mind can obtain knowledge of God by force of logic. But Ghazali would also condemn the philosophers for thinking that logic can yield necessary knowledge about matters that pertain to God's relation to the world.

To clarify: To be able to know God by analogical argumentation, deriving conclusions about the creator on the basis of philosophical inquiry into his creation, one has to assume that the world has a rational order such that one might be able to draw conclusions about things even apart from revelation, as noted earlier. Thus, without such order, it would be impossible to obtain knowledge of the world. One might think things work in a certain way, drawing conclusions through reasoned reflection on the things of the world, gradually ascending to knowledge of God by force of logic. But then one would learn that there is no such order. Things appear to be rationally ordered, but it is really God making it seem so. One could thus not be sure that one's conclusions, deduced through rational inquiry, had any rational basis at all. Without a rational order whereby things operate according to their natures, one could not hope to acquire knowledge of the world. In turn, you could not draw conclusions about God as its creator. Ironically, to claim that one can make conclusions about God through philosophy requires one to be a quasi-deist.

Ghazali says you can obtain knowledge of God in this fashion. This commits him to a rational order in the universe that necessarily works on its own terms apart from God's direct involvement. But he also implies that you cannot obtain knowledge of God in this way because the mind on its own

cannot know of necessity the nature of God's relation to the world. Ghazali is caught between two methods of obtaining knowledge of God, each ordered to a different system of causality: one where the world governs itself, and another where God governs it directly. In the first, prophecy is not needed to obtain certain knowledge of God; reasoning alone is enough. However, in the second, certainty comes only with prophetic instruction.

Ghazali had to accept both systems, even if they were not entirely reconcilable. He had to do so if he hoped to meet the philosophical challenge without compromising the integrity of God's revealed message. He has great confidence in the power of the mind to know on its own, for example, that God is good. But as a student of Ash'arism, Ghazali accepts that it is not for humans to determine the goodness of God. Only God can know the ways in which God's goodness is determined. Thus, while the mind can know that God is good by demonstrable proof, Ghazali hesitates to accept that logic yields necessary knowledge that God is good. That comes only when the Qur'an describes God as merciful (mercy being a type of goodness).

Ghazali is not making philosophy a subset of prophecy, as if the mind were capable of grasping only part of the picture. Rather, prophecy has a share in philosophy. God taught logic to the prophets. In this sense, scripture verifies by divine authority what the mind posits by philosophical logic. But the opposite is not true. Without prophetic instruction, philosophy would be blind or at least cross-eyed. The knowledge of God that the mind comes up with on its own might be true; or it might not be. Without a higher standard of judgment, that is, without the meta-rational phenomenon of revelation, the mind has no way to verify its own conclusions about God's relation to the world. Without prophecy, the mind would have no way of being certain about core issues of existence. Its logically derived conclusions might be true or might not be. Such knowledge would be no more than mere opinion. Just as senses and images have to be tested against reason, so, too, philosophy has to be tested against prophecy, at least for final knowledge of God.

Divine speaking and human thinking in tandem

Ghazali is caught between two views of the world: We can and cannot know the workings of the world by the power of the mind. We can and cannot derive knowledge of God by rationally examining the workings of the world. Does this make Ghazali a skeptic? He would not admit to being one, but he makes great use of a type of skepticism to show the mind's inability to obtain final knowledge of God, necessitating prophecy, to corroborate, not necessarily reject, its findings.⁴⁸ Ghazali lives in two worlds that do not exist in perfect harmony, but he is aware of the quandary.

To deal with it, Ghazali constructs a theory of existence where the mind is related to divine speech as one of its effects. It is this nexus between human reasoning and divine speaking that forms the heart of his system of philosophical prophecy. He agrees with philosophers that the universe has its own rationality,

but to preserve the integrity of divine speech (revelation), he claims that the rationality of the universe is one of its effects. As effects are like their causes, so, too, the workings of the mind bear a likeness to the workings of prophecy, at least to the extent that the individual mind conforms to the rationality of the universe. This is to give the mind a “prophetic” legitimacy, making it not only capable but also worthy of acquiring knowledge of God on its own terms (that is, via logic). At the same time, if properly prepared, the mind can receive divine speech directly from the niche of prophetic instruction. There are, then, two ways for the mind to ascend to God. Both originate in a single source, God’s communication, but one way ascends to God indirectly via the rationality of the universe, the other, directly through prophecy.

Ghazali’s system of philosophical prophecy draws upon what by his day had become a long-standing debate over the nature of language. One sees traces of the controversy in many of his works—from the chapter on reciting the Qur’an (*Tilāwat al-Qur’ān*) in *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences* to his last work, *Restraining the Masses from Theological Disputation*. Ghazali is committed to the divine status of God’s speech even if it is humans who recite it. If God’s speech were not divine, if it were simply a physical process resulting from material vibrations in the throat, it would be of little help in getting you to God: A physical process cannot get you to God. The language of revelation has for Ghazali what we might call ritual efficacy. What would be the point of reading the Qur’an and reciting the names of God if divine speech were simply a physical process without the power to open the mind to the reality of God? As Ghazali explains in the chapter on the foundations of doctrine (*Qawā’id al-‘Aqā’id*) in *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*, God’s speech, the Qur’an, may be recited on tongues, written on scrolls, and remembered in human hearts, but it remains as eternal as the essence of God in which it subsists. It is this that makes mystical insight possible. Meditating on the message of God in the Qur’an allows the mind to see divine realities with the eye of the heart.

At the same time, philosophical reasoning also opens the mind to the realities of God. After all, recitation of the Qur’an, if it is not to be reduced to a simple hearing of words, must engage the mind no less than the ear. But for the mind to receive divine speech, it must be “like” God in some fashion. It is for this purpose that Ghazali speaks of the mind as a light, the light of the heart. As light, it resembles the light of God. It also bears a likeness to divine speech, since, as noted above, universal rationality is one of the effects of divine speech, and effects resemble their cause. Thus, the mind bears a likeness to the speech of God, especially when it adheres to the logic of the rational order (that is, universal rationality or intellect).

The link between human rationality and divine speech is made in two works: *Intellectual Cognitions* and *The Niche of Lights*. Both combine philosophical categories and scriptural language. *Intellectual Cognitions* makes greater use of philosophical categories, and *The Niche of Lights* of scriptural language. The fact that there is allusion in *The Niche of Lights* to the title of *Intellectual Cognitions* (*al-Ma‘ārif al-‘Aqliyya*) suggests that the two are a

pair—and also that *The Niche of Lights* was written after *Intellectual Cognitions*—as if *The Niche of Lights* is Ghazali's final statement on a topic he had initially considered in *Intellectual Cognitions*.

Intellectual Cognitions defines rationality as the mark of being human.⁴⁹ Rationality (*nuṭq*) distinguishes humans not only from animals but also from God. Ghazali is careful to say that God is not subject to such rationality. It is not one of his attributes. However, the Qur'an, God's speech in distinction from God, is, for its part, described as rational (*nāṭiq*). Thus, human reasoning, which has nothing in common with God's essence, does potentially have something in common with God's speech:

God has called his book rational [*nāṭiq*] so that the intelligent might know that people who are rational are those whose soul is both modeled after the book of Allah the Exalted and formed in accordance with the contents of the words of Allah the Exalted.⁵⁰

The link between human thinking and divine speaking is the rationality of the universe (the universal intellect), which is one of the effects of a word from God's speech (*athar kalima min kalām allāh*); and rationality (*nuṭq*), in turn, results from the mind's relation to the universal intellect (*al-'aql al-kullī*).⁵¹ The more rational one is, the more one ascends beyond the senses to the realities of the metaphysical world. The process is helped along by religious practices, but it is determined by the dictates of rationality. Rationality is a means for humans to penetrate the spiritual realm, but this does not compromise the integrity of scripture since the process is foregrounded in the fact that the mind is like scripture:

The rational person is the one whose soul is the likeness [*mithāl*] of the book of Allah the Exalted and whose heart is a copy of the words of Allah the Praiseworthy, enabling him to hear his Lord the Exalted and also to hear others. This process is the height of human dignity, equal to the state of the angels, upon them peace, who have the attribute of rationality [*nuṭq*]. The human, as rational, is potentially angelic. When rational in essence, breaking with the attachments of the body, the human being becomes angelic in actuality.⁵²

Humans, rational in essence, are meant to be creatures of the angelic realm. This makes the human being worthy of being God's representative on earth and commander of the city of the heart, but it requires "following shari'a, performing ritual worship, obeying prophecy, and acknowledging the lordship of Allah."⁵³ Thus, by failing to respond to divine speech, one betrays one's own essential rationality.

The rationality of humanity is perfected through its relation to prophetic instruction. Speech, however, is different from rationality. In contrast to rationality, speech is something humans share with God. However, while

God's speech is one with his knowledge, this is not the case with humans. They may or may not speak with knowledge. How, then, are humans to speak with knowledge? It depends on the perfection of their rationality, which, as will be recalled, comes about by transcending the physical for the spiritual. Human speech, unlike the speech of God, is implicated in the physical processes of the world. To be perfected, it has to be informed by a power that is metaphysical in essence, namely, its own rationality. Thus, by being rational, one is prepared to receive knowledge that God "pours forth on those of his creatures he wants to honor."⁵⁴ In this sense, humans do not really speak on their own but only insofar as their speech reflects something of the speech of God. And this is contingent on the mind's relation to the universal intellect, itself the effect of a word of God's speech. The rationality of the universe is the link between the mind and divine communication, a link that the mystical scholastic, once purified of his defects, embodies better than others. This does not make him "one" with God in any way—Ghazali maintains the distinction—but it does prompt him to approach God as "lord of the intellect and the soul and rationality."⁵⁵

The Niche of Lights also expounds upon the idea of a human–divine nexus, albeit with different language.⁵⁶ In this work, Ghazali speaks of universal light rather than universal intellect. The link is described in terms of seeing rather than reasoning. The mind, once illuminated by the light of wisdom, can "see" whereas before it was blind. Here, the human–divine likeness is expressed more in terms of light than speech. In this way, Ghazali is seeking to establish theological grounds for the possibility of mystical insight: One is able to see divine realities by being illuminated by the light of God. However, in both works, he veers in a monistic direction whereby humans share something with God that allows them to acquire knowledge of God. For humans to be able to know God, they must share in the existence of God, making all existence ultimately one. Human rationality, commander of the natural realm, must have a relation with divine speech (or light) as master of the spiritual realm. Ghazali is thus forging a human–divine link to reconcile the contradiction of the two systems of causality discussed above. However, doing so requires him to take on a monistic view of existence.⁵⁷

How does this work in *The Niche of Lights*? Ghazali speaks of the eye of the mind that allows humans to see spiritual realities beyond senses and images, just as the naked eye allows them to see the things of the physical world. But this is not enough. Just as the naked eye cannot see physical things without the light of the sun, so, too, the eye of the mind cannot see spiritual realities without the light of wisdom. Ghazali then says that there is no wisdom greater than the speech of God. Thus, just as the light of the naked eye has to work in tandem with the light of the sun for sight to be possible in the physical world, so, too, the light of God, the Qur'an, works in tandem with the light of the mind for mystical insight to be possible.

Philosophers would agree that the mind is the link between the physical and metaphysical worlds, but Ghazali distinguishes his system from theirs by

conceiving of it in scriptural terms. In this work, instead of universal rationality, he speaks of universal light, which is nothing but the light of God. He takes the important step of defining the human being as an exemplar of the light of God. Here, as in other works, Ghazali is walking a fine line. He is careful to point out that human–divine resemblance does not amount to equality. The human is not like God but rather like the light of God, which is divine speech. The human–divine nexus lies in the relation of the mind to divine speech. The same point was made in *Intellectual Cognitions*. Here, too, even if using the image of light to depict the likeness, Ghazali describes the soul in terms of divine writing.⁵⁸ All humans, by virtue of being human, have the potential to reflect the light of God. (Recall his statement in his debate with the follower of the infallible imam that all have the potential to become prophet-like through the use of logic.) But most do not make it to this level of being. The Prophet does, sharing in the sacred spirit of prophecy, and so does the scholar with mystical insight (*ṣāhib al-dhawq*),⁵⁹ attained, presumably, as a result of learned ignorance.

Ghazali is seeking to delineate a realm where the mind retains its integrity and God is the final origin and cause of things. What is manifest to the mystically minded scholars in the eye of the heart is what God has made manifest, namely, things in reality—as they exist with God. In this sense, prophets and saints do not see anything except to see God alongside it,⁶⁰ capable of grasping how effects resemble their causes. The effect must be like the cause,⁶¹ but in this context, the spiritual realm, there is only one cause, namely, God. Those at this level thus have knowledge of things as they exist “with” God. For them, there is no veil between the existence of things and their existence with God. They realize that God is the only thing that exists. Just as all light originates ultimately in God, so, too, all existence originates in God. Things have existence insofar as they are oriented to the light of God. When they turn away from God, they have no light. They are in the darkness of non-existence. If you are not in the light, you do not exist. Those who realize this—the prophets and saints—see only God in all that exists, including themselves. They know that things are manifest only because of the One who makes all things manifest. Seeing things, they thus think of the One who makes them manifest. All is but a metaphor of this one reality. Ghazali veers in the direction of monism. He may not have been fundamentally committed to it, but he has to assume it in order to explain how the way in which the mind understands things by force of logic is not alien to how they really are. He does this by claiming that prophets and saints see things as they really are, that is, as they exist in terms of the singular agency of God.

Monism here does not mean all is God but that all exists with God. It is a mystical rather than a philosophical way of understanding the truths of things as well as the ultimate workings of causality in terms of a single system rather than two. But it is as much potential as actual. We understand things as they really are to the extent we perfect our knowledge of God. By perfecting our knowledge of God, we will act more in accordance with God’s will. All of this

depends on knowing things in their ontological reality, not simply as they appear to the naked eye. Mystical insight is thus needed to obtain knowledge of things as they really are. Philosophical inquiry, however important, is not enough. But mystical insight is impossible without the Qur'an. Reciting and meditating on the divine speech of the Qur'an, the eye of the heart opens to ultimate realities. The saints can see what the prophets conveyed. They are not prophets. They do not have a new message from God. But they verify, as firsthand witnesses, the realities of which God speaks to prophets.

Mystical insight, however, never does away with syllogistic reasoning. Those who are prophet-like scholars, precisely because of their meta-rational insight, have perfect intuition, allowing them to know the middle term in syllogistic reasoning effortlessly. In this way, they are able to know the truth of things amidst the appearances. The saint is the true philosopher, the mystically minded philosopher who secures the truths of Islam, both because he is eyewitness to them in their true reality and because he has certain knowledge of them by a mastery of syllogistic reasoning surpassing that of the philosophers. In sum, knowledge of the truths of things comes with mystical insight into the spiritual order, but the physical order has a resemblance to the spiritual order. It is this that makes it possible for the mind to penetrate the spiritual order through philosophical inquiry into the physical order. However, Ghazali is not saying the same thing as philosophers in this regard. The mind can ascend to knowledge of God by force of logic, but it cannot be certain of what it pretends to know of God by its own power. Verification comes with mystical insight made possible by revelation. That is, the mind on its own is a light, but without scripture, it remains in the dark at least when it comes to knowledge of God. Few operate at this level where human reasoning and divine speaking work in tandem; prophets and saints do, as do prophet-like or mystically minded scholars, but philosophers do not. To get to this level, a joint formation is needed in philosophy and mystical insight as made possible by the light of the Qur'an, which offers lessons in logic while also opening the mind to the realities of the other world.

Ghazali draws heavily upon the heritage of Sufism for his scholarly project. By this time, the scholars of Sufism had developed a theory of beauty by which to speak of the human lover and divine beloved in terms of mutual attraction. For God to incline in love to even the saintliest of believers, there has to be some essential affinity between them and him. The idea here is that likes attract, not opposites. For God to love the human being, there thus has to be something about the human being, as human being, that is like God. Ghazali rejects the gist of this idea. There is nothing about humans as humans that is like God. But he does make use of the idea for his scholarly project. Union with God is not possible for humans, but the mind can be said to be not like God but like God's speech. Sufism offers him a perspective to tie together his two systems of causality whereby the world works according to a rational order of cause and effect and God is also the sole cause of all things. To realize this, one must "see" and not simply hear about the truths of

the other world. Just as one does not really know love from definitions without experiencing it, so, too, one does not really have knowledge of the things of God without mystical insight. Once tasted, it inspires one to solve all conundrums, as Ghazali notes in the chapter on love, desire, intimacy, and favor (*al-Maḥabba wa-l-Shawq wa-l-Uns wa-l-Riḍā*) in his magnum opus:

Thus, all regions of the realm of the heavens and the earth form the arena of the true knower [*al-ʿarīf*], who occupies it as he wishes without needing to move his body or person. Those possessed of perfection do know sensory and carnal pleasure along with the pleasure of leadership, but they prefer leadership. As for the meaning of the knowledge of Allah, his attributes, his acts, the realm of his heavens, and the mysteries of his rule—which form the greatest pleasure of leadership—they are limited to the knowledge of those who attain the rank of knowledge and taste it. Here, all that can be said is: Whoever tastes has knowledge. Upon my life! Those who seek knowledge [*ʿulūm*], even if they do not seek the knowledge of divine matters, do have a nose for the fragrance of this pleasure [that is, the pleasure of scholarly leadership], since by it, obscurities [*mushkilāt*] are unveiled and ambiguities [*shubuhāt*] resolved. It is what strengthens their resolve to pursue knowledge. There are also kinds of knowledge and sciences the content of which does not attain to the nobility of the divine sciences. Whoever reflects at length on knowledge of Allah the Praiseworthy, such that even a bit of the mysteries of Allah's realm is unveiled to him, he finds in his heart such joy at the disclosure that he almost flies as a result. He is amazed within himself at his endurance and ability to bear the power of his joy and happiness. This is only comprehended by taste [*dhawq*].⁶²

Here, knowers are those who, when they see things, see them with God. It is a kind of knowing that Ghazali, again, calls taste (*dhawq*), which operates not according to analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) but in terms of mystical consciousness (*wijdān*).⁶³ His system of learning begins as a form of scholastic inquiry but is best described as a mystical rather than a philosophical kind of *ratio*. The two texts below show the link between the intellectual foregrounding (learned ignorance and its monistic byproduct) and a scholastic methodology of mystical insight:

The mind [*ʿaql*] of those with insight, when they examine the details of what God the Exalted has made [even when they see the gnat] are dazzled, and their inner core [*lubb*] is confused [*yataḥayyar*, alluding to learned ignorance]. Because of this, the grandeur of God, His Majesty, and the perfection of his attributes grow in their hearts, and their love for Him grows. The more they are acquainted with the wonders of God's making, the more they derive from it [knowledge of] the grandeur and majesty of God the maker, increasing in awareness and love for Him.⁶⁴

Those with strong insight [*baṣīra*] and endowment [*minna*] that is not weakened, when in a state of inner balance, see only God the Exalted; are not aware of anything but Him; and know that there is nothing in existence except God. His acts are a trace of his power [*qudra*] and are subject to Him. They have no existence in reality [*bi-l-ḥaqīqa*] apart from Him. Existence belongs, rather, to the One, the Truth. Through Him is the existence of all his actions. Those in this state look at actions only to see in them the agent [that is, God]. ... The entire world is the composition of [composed of?] God the Exalted. Those who look at it as God's action are aware of it as God's action and love it as God's action—look only at God, know only God, and love only God.⁶⁵

In the end, philosophy makes sense on its own terms, but this is no threat to the integrity of revelation since the mind by which philosophy operates is now construed in the image of the divine reality that is known through revelation. The mind has its autonomy, but it must also recognize its limits. It can range freely within its own realm, namely, the physical order, but when it soars beyond the bounds of its realm into the spiritual order, it realizes that its brand of logic cannot determine all things about God. Only God through his speech can do so. But this does not involve violation of the workings of the mind, only greater understanding of itself as made in the likeness of God's speech—and greater knowledge of the truths of things. Revelation is thus needed for the mind to know God as he really is and, in turn, to know things as they really are. The intelligent realize that there are things about God that the mind cannot know of necessity, making it logical to take recourse to prophetic instruction in that regard. But it is only to confirm, not to deny, the mechanics of the mind. Skepticism has played the role assigned to it, putting philosophy in its proper place but not damaging it. We see this in a passage from Ghazali's autobiography, *Deliverance from Error*, just when he is paralyzed by doubts about acquiring knowledge, whether by the senses or by the mind:

When these thoughts occurred to me and weighed deeply in my soul, I tried to find some way to treat them, but it was not easy, since they could not only be refuted by evidence, and evidence can only be established by constructing a proof on the basis of primary knowledge [that is, knowledge obtained by the senses and logically self-evident ideas, things about which he now has doubts], but if this cannot be accepted, it is impossible to construct the evidence. My illness was enigmatic, lasting almost two months, during which time I belonged to the school of skepticism [*madhhab al-safsāṭa*] in my inner condition even if I did not declare it publicly, until Allah the Exalted cured me of that disease. My soul returned to health and balance, and the necessary truths of the mind became accepted once again as reliably sure and certain. But this did not happen as a result of composing evidence and arranging a theological argument but by a light that Allah the Exalted cast into my breast. That

light is the key to most of the various kinds of knowledge [or cognitions, *al-ma'ārif*]. Whoever supposes that mystical disclosure is based on positively ordered evidence has narrowed the wide mercy of Allah the Exalted.⁶⁶

Conclusion

Few things in the history of ideas are as bewildering as Ghazali's system of thought. It is difficult to follow because it attempts to bring together two sets of truths that are ultimately irreconcilable. The first is the notion of efficient causality whereby things in the world work according to their own natures. The second is the notion of divine voluntarism whereby things work as God makes them work. Nevertheless, one must admire Ghazali's valiant efforts to bring it all together.

To do this, he has to knock down philosophy without knocking it out. Using logic, he has to show that the mind arrives at a point where it acknowledges its ignorance of God. This does not mean that the mind can know nothing of God, but it is limited in that regard—hence, the need for prophetic instruction and a corresponding method, mystical seeing, by which to obtain verification of the revealed message. At the same time, Ghazali has to show that the rules of logic are actually a scriptural phenomenon. God teaches logic no less than he discloses knowledge of the other world. On top of it all, Ghazali needs to ground the system in a vision of existence in which humanity and divinity, while not the same, are nevertheless not without some resemblance. Human thinking and divine speaking can thus work in tandem. God's speech does not violate the workings of the human mind just as the human mind recognizes its need for prophetic instruction. The operation of divine speech is reflected in the ability of the human soul to think abstractly and form images of the truths of things in the mirror of the heart.

A vision in which humanity and divinity work in tandem requires Ghazali to take a step toward a theory of monism in which all that exists only exists insofar as it exists in the light of God. As the sun allows the physical eye to see, so God's light allows things to be. It is this idea that would have a tremendous impact on the intellectual life of Islam for centuries to come. Scholarship on Ghazali in recent years has increasingly made note of his debt to Avicenna. This is now undeniable, but it is going too far to say that Ghazali's thought is effectively the same as that of Avicenna albeit in theological disguise. Discussion will continue on the ways in which Ghazali is indebted to Avicenna, but the fact that Ghazali ventured in a monistic direction suggests that his intellectual project is ultimately different in kind from that of Avicenna; it is not merely a more religiously colored formulation of the same vision. Ghazali is as interested in how God communicates his knowledge to prophets and saints meta-rationally as he is in how philosophers demonstrate it by logic—hence, his call for learned ignorance. God's speech is a reflection

of his knowledge. At the same time, his knowledge, even if it is above and beyond anything the human mind can know on its own, leaves its mark on the rationality of the universe. For this reason, the prophets and saints are connected to the rationality of the universe no less than they are to the revelation of God in prophecy. Humans have knowledge because they are rational. In this sense, rationality is the cause of their knowledge. In contrast, God has knowledge not because he is rational but because he is God. Knowledge is part of his essence. It has no cause. It is God's knowledge that is the cause of the rationality of the universe. This, for Ghazali, is where philosophers err. God's knowledge is not bound by rationality even as it informs the rationality of the universe. The minds of philosophers go far in figuring things out but cannot go the whole way without prophecy, making skepticism vital for Ghazali as a means of informing philosophers, Avicenna included, of their own highly learned ignorance.

In all this, we might learn something from Ghazali. This is not to suggest that there are not serious problems with his system of thought.⁶⁷ The theology he espoused maintains that God was the cause of all things whereas the philosophy he embraced holds that the world operated according to its own rational order. God, it seemed, was both actively involved in the world's affairs *and* he was not. There is a measure of wisdom to this skeptical formulation, which was perhaps an unintended consequence rather than a conscious aim of Ghazali's scholarly endeavors. Ghazali's is a mature expression of skepticism, making him at home in two systems of causality, both of which cannot be true. Oddly enough, this did not paralyze him but rather inspired him to think more attentively about the relation between human thinking and divine speaking. For this reason, he is rightly remembered as the greatest of Islam's scholars, and his writings continue to intrigue all who take them up today.

Notes

1 al-Bukhārī, "Bāb al-'Ilm," *Sahīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 100.

2 Ghazali saw himself as the reviver of Islam in his age. See Kenneth Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver: Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī and His Revival of the Religious Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013). I had access to Garden's study, which is a splendid analysis of Ghazali's reformist role in society, only after completing this work. My reflections here, which look at Ghazali's scholarly project more than the way in which he planned to use it to renew Islam in his day, are very much of a piece with Garden's insights. Also, Garden makes a compelling argument for translating Ghazali's so-called autobiography as *The Deliverer from Error*, emphasizing his self-conscious role as the divinely appointed renewer of Islam, rather than *The Deliverance from Error*. However, while accepting Garden's insight, I retain the latter translation for the purposes of this chapter.

3 See Kenneth Garden, "al-Ghazālī's Contested Revival: *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and its Critics in Khorasan and the Maghrib," Ph.D. diss. (Chicago: University of Chicago 2005); idem, "al-Māzarī al-Dhakī: al-Ghazālī's Maghribi Adversary in Nishapur," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 21:1 (2010), pp. 9–107.

- 4 al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* (*Deliverance from Error*), eds. Jamīl Salībā and Kāmil ‘Ayyād, 7th edition (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus 1967), pp. 96–97, where within the discussion of Isma‘ilism, “confused” (*mutaḥayyir*) is used eight times in the scholastic sense (as discussed above in chapters one and two) to describe a person unable to distinguish the status of truth among opposing theological schools. Ghazali seems, then, to have associated another kind of skepticism with Isma‘ilism. Indeed, in *Faḍā’ih al-Bāṭiniyya* (*Scandals of the Esoteric Believers*), he accuses the missionaries of Isma‘ilism of skeptical strategies to undermine people’s confidence in rational argumentation and encourage submission to the imam as the singular source of divine instruction.
- 5 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fi Sharḥ Asmā’ Allāh al-Ḥusnā* (*The Highest Goal in Explaining the Meanings of God’s Most Beautiful Names*), ed. Fadlou A. Shehadi (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq 1971), pp. 70–71.
- 6 See Paul L. Heck, “Teaching Ignorance: The Case of Ghazālī (d. 1111),” in Sebastian Günther, ed., *Knowledge and Education in Classical Islam* (forthcoming).
- 7 Ghazali elaborates this argument over the course of “the first art” (*al-fann al-awwal*) in *al-Maqṣad al-Asnā*, pp. 15–59.
- 8 See Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009).
- 9 al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, pp. 116–17.
- 10 al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Salām 2003), vol. 2, p. 1606.
- 11 Frank Griffel, “al-Gazālī’s Concept of Prophecy: The Introduction of Avicennan Psychology into Aš‘arite Theology,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14 (2004), pp. 101–44.
- 12 Christian Europe faced a similar dilemma in the thirteenth century. See Ulrich G. Leinsle, *Introduction to Scholastic Theology*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press 2010), pp. 131–47.
- 13 Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010).
- 14 M. Afifi al-Akiti, “The Three Properties of Prophethood in Certain Works of al-Gazālī and Avicenna,” in Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, eds., *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill 2004), pp. 189–212.
- 15 Ghazali’s appropriation of—and affiliation with—the logic of philosophy is succinctly expressed in his short treatise on the topic, *Mihakk al-Nazar fi l-Mantiq* (*The Litmus Test of Inquiry into Logic*), ed. Muḥammad Badr al-Dīn al-Na’sānī and Muṣṭafā al-Qabbānī (Cairo: al-Maṭba’a al-Adabiyya 1925).
- 16 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-Asnā*, p. 54.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 48–49.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 57–59.
- 19 al-Ghazālī, *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā al-Qabbānī, 3rd edition (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-‘Ulūm 1990), p. 26.
- 20 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-Asnā*, p. 49.
- 21 Ibid., p. 55.
- 22 See Alexander Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Al-Ghazālī’s Theory of Mystical Cognition and its Avicennian Foundation* (London: Routledge 2012).
- 23 al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 2, p. 1663.
- 24 Ibid., *passim*, vol. 2, pp. 1658–68.
- 25 al-Ghazālī, *al-Ḥikma fi Makhlūqāt Allāh* (*The Wisdom in God’s Creations*), ed. Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā al-Qabbānī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-‘Ulūm 1978), pp. 13–14.
- 26 Ibid., pp. 66–70.
- 27 Ibid., pp. 68–69.

- 28 Frank Griffel, "Taqlīd of the Philosophers: al-Ghazālī's Initial Accusations in his *Tahāfut*," in Sebastian Günther, ed., *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam* (Leiden: Brill 2005), pp. 273–96.
- 29 al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 2, p. 1796.
- 30 al-Ghazālī, *Mi'yār al-'Ilm*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif 1961), pp. 61–65.
- 31 al-Ghazālī, *al-Qisṭās al-Mustaqīm* (*The Just Balance*), ed. Maḥmūd Bijū (Damascus: al-Maṭba'a al-'Ilmiyya 1993).
- 32 al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, p. 95.
- 33 Binyamin Abrahamov, "al-Ghazālī's Supreme Way to Know God," *Studia Islamica* 77 (1973), pp. 141–68.
- 34 al-Ghazālī, *al-Qisṭās al-Mustaqīm*, pp. 41–44.
- 35 Ibid., pp. 37–38.
- 36 Ibid., p. 37.
- 37 Ibid., p. 46.
- 38 Ibid., p. 51.
- 39 Ibid., p. 46.
- 40 Ibid., p. 57.
- 41 Ibid., p. 60.
- 42 Frank Griffel, "Tolerance and Exclusion: al-Shafi'i and al-Ghazali on the Treatment of Apostates," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 64 (2001), pp. 339–54.
- 43 al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), ed. and trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press 1997). For a useful analysis of this work, see Leor Halevi, "The Theologian's Doubts: Natural Philosophy and the Skeptical Games of Ghazālī," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (2002), pp. 19–29.
- 44 Robert Wisnovsky, "One Aspect of the Avicennian Turn in Sunnī Theology," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14 (2004), pp. 65–100.
- 45 Michael E. Marmura, "Al-Ghazālī on Bodily Resurrection and Causality in the *Tahāfut* and the *Iqtisād*," *Aligarh Journal of Islamic Thought* 2 (1989), pp. 46–75.
- 46 M. Afifi al-Akiti, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of the *Falsafa*: Al-Ghazālī's *Maḍnūn*, *Tahāfut*, and *Maqāṣid*, with Particular Attention to their *Falsafī* Treatments of God's Knowledge of Temporal Events," in Y. Tzvi Langermann, ed., *Avicenna and his Legacy: A Golden Age of Science and Philosophy* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols 2009), pp. 51–100.
- 47 Ghazali spells out his interpretative approach to scripture in *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayn al-Islām wa-l-Zandaqa* (*The Decisive Separation of Islam and Heresy*), ed. Salīm Dughaym (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Lubnānī 1993).
- 48 Fadloul Shehadi, *al-Ghazālī's Unique Unknowable God: A Philosophical Critical Analysis of Some of the Problems Raised by al-Ghazālī's View of God as Utterly Unique and Unknowable* (Leiden: Brill 1964).
- 49 al-Ghazālī, *al-Ma'ārif al-'Aqliyya* (*Intellectual Cognitions*), ed. 'Alī Idrīs (Sfax, Tunisia: al-Ta'āqudiyya al-'Ummāliyya li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr 1988).
- 50 Ibid., p. 52.
- 51 Ibid., p. 51.
- 52 Ibid., pp. 54–55.
- 53 Ibid., p. 60.
- 54 Ibid., p. 75.
- 55 Ibid., p. 61.
- 56 al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (*The Niche of Lights*), ed. and trans. David Buchman (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press 1998).
- 57 The nature of Ghazali's monistic tendencies has been the object of recent study. See Alexander Treiger, "Monism and Monotheism in al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār*,"

Journal of Qur'anic Studies 9 (2007), pp. 1–27; and Frank Griffel, “Al-Ghazālī’s Cosmology in the Veil Section of his *Mishkāt al-Anwār*,” in Y. Tzvi Langermann, ed., *Avicenna and his Legacy: A Golden Age of Science and Philosophy* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols 2009), pp. 27–59.

58 al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, pp. 31–32.

59 Ibid., p. 30.

60 Ibid., p. 23.

61 Ibid., pp. 12 and 26–27.

62 al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 2, pp. 1667–68.

63 al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, p. 38.

64 al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 2, p. 1679.

65 Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 1680–82.

66 al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, pp. 67–68.

67 See Avital Wohlman, *Al-Ghazali, Averroës and the Interpretation of the Qur’an: Common Sense and Philosophy in Islam*, trans. David Burrell (London: Routledge 2010).

4 Words are words

No Christian is not ignorant of the origins of his religion.

Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328)

Baghdad bemoaned

By the end of the thirteenth century, the lights of Baghdad had begun to dim. A once shining center of civilization was now a pallid glimmer of its former glory. The Mongols, under the command of Hulagu, a grandson of Genghis Khan, had brought destruction to the City of Peace in 1258. His forces ravaged Baghdad and then executed al-Mustaʿsim, the last of its caliphs, rolling him up in a rug and riding their horses over him. The Mongols would show little interest in the city that for five centuries had been the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate. Their rulers were descendants of Genghis Khan, world conqueror favored by heaven. This gave them claims of their own to universal dominion. Little concerned for the symbols of Islam's past grandeur, they would set up their capitals to the south of the Caspian Sea in today's north-western Iran. The neglect of Baghdad served as a sign that the Abode of Islam was now under infidel rule. This, of course, was not the end of Islam, as some predicted, but it did provoke strong feelings of anxiety about the sovereignty of Islam within its own house. The demise of Baghdad stood as a stark reminder that forces other than those of God were now in control of the Abode of Islam.

The last hope of Islam was a military dynasty with no claim to prophetic descent. The Mamluks of Cairo, once slaves, had been purchased from Central Asia and trained for military leadership. They now ruled as a powerful oligarchy of elite soldiers, a royal house of sorts, bound together by political privilege. Of Turkic ancestry, they dominated a population of Arabs and Copts and would sometimes compete violently among themselves for power and prestige.¹ Ruling from their capital in Cairo, the Mamluks controlled lands extending between Egypt and Syria as well as the western regions of the Arabian Peninsula, home to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Alone among Islam's rulers, they had held out against the Mongol onslaught. It was

arguably not fighting prowess that brought about their now legendary defense of the umma at the Battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt, north of Jerusalem, in 1260. The Mongol commanders, preoccupied with questions of dynastic succession in the East, did not commit the troops needed to push westwards. Still, the Mamluks would also prevail against subsequent Mongol attempts to conquer the Levant.

Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328): Shaykh of Islam

It was under Mamluk rule that Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), the focus of this chapter, would struggle to maintain the supremacy of Islam over the hearts of believers at a time when its supremacy over its own lands was in question.² The challenge was twofold: to demonstrate that only Islam’s beliefs were true and also to defend its sovereignty in its own lands against external forces. A religious scholar of vast learning, Ibn Taymiyya, who spent most of his life in Damascus, called for—and would also participate in—jihad against unbelievers. Even after the Mongols had converted to Islam, he still sought to convince Mamluk rulers of the need for jihad against them. In his view, the law of the Mongols was based not on divine revelation but on customs devised by the human mind. Application of human reasoning to divine affairs was for Ibn Taymiyya evidence of polytheism, making the Mongols, though Muslim in name, rebels against God.³

However, for Ibn Taymiyya, the greatest threat was not the military advance of infidels into the Abode of Islam but the religious decadence among Muslims. The scholarly leaders of the umma had become so enamored of rationalizing approaches to knowledge of God that they could no longer think clearly about the message of God in its scriptural form. Such approaches amounted to mere conjecture, making them no better than Christians, who, Ibn Taymiyya claimed, had no certain knowledge of God since they based their theological reasoning on conjecture rather than scripture. Tragically, in his view, Muslims were now guilty of the same error, and Ibn Taymiyya set out to show Muslims where they had gone wrong.

It seems odd to associate Ibn Taymiyya with skepticism in any sense. He certainly had no doubts about the revelation of Islam. Rather, the problem was the way in which the logic of the Greeks and philosophy in general had been increasingly absorbed into Islam’s scholarly discourse.⁴ Ibn Taymiyya saw this development as a radical inversion of the standards of knowledge that should prevail in Islam. He thus mounted skeptical attacks on the rationality of logic. It had no place in clear thinking about God. His attacks were by no means unreasoned, and his strong suspicion of the power of logic as a means of acquiring knowledge of God marks him with a kind of skepticism found in other contexts.⁵ A key feature of skepticism in its ancient origins was suspicion of logic as a means to truth. Of course, in contrast to doubts about the power of logic in the ancient world, Ibn Taymiyya accepted a revealed body of knowledge, but that is no reason not to try to specify the

skeptical aspect of his thinking. It also does not mean that we should seek to trace Ibn Taymiyya's skepticism in a direct line to Sextus Empiricus, the common rejection of logic notwithstanding. As we will see, Ibn Taymiyya sought to find terminology specific to Islam's revealed message to give expression to this kind of skepticism, making it essential to include him in a study of skepticism in Islam.

There were some Muslims whose beliefs Ibn Taymiyya held to be entirely corrupt. The worst offenders were partisans of Shi'ism and Sufism who deified their leaders in the manner of Christians. However, in some respects, Ibn Taymiyya sought to relax the criteria by which one was judged to be a Muslim. To this end, he criticized scholars for placing unnecessary rationalist expectations on believers, as if one could be a Muslim only by mastering demonstrable proofs for the existence of God. Ibn Taymiyya sought to remind his fellow believers that it was not necessary to have expertise in the logic of Aristotle to be a Muslim. It was not philosophical reasoning that determined one's standing as a Muslim but rather the words of scripture as conveyed and interpreted by Muhammad. To validate one's standing as a member of the umma, one need not have command of the scholastic terms used to demonstrate the existence of God through philosophical argument. One need not train one's mind in the metaphysics of beings and the relation of their "accidents" to their "essences." One need not know why the premise that a thing with originated parts in its being is itself originated has anything to do with belief in God.

Ibn Taymiyya was by no means rejecting rationality but rather the excessive confidence that Islam's scholars had placed in philosophical speculation—speculation that did not necessarily bring certainty but only greater confusion and division among Muslims. Rationality, Ibn Taymiyya argued, was considerably simpler than what scholars made it out to be with all their scholastic acrobatics. What is it that a person should know in order to qualify as a Muslim? God is clear on the matter: The Qur'an says people should know that God is one and that they will be held accountable for their acts. If Islam's scholars considered the matter, they would see that such knowledge as revealed by God is exactly what humans naturally espouse even without all the rarefied terms and perplexing concepts of philosophy.

Still, even if he did not quite accuse Muslims of manifest infidelity, Ibn Taymiyya felt that things had gone terribly wrong. Muslims were at risk of going the way of the Christians, who had so utterly distorted the message of scripture that they could no longer be said to be worshipping God. Muslims, like Christians, were in danger of worshipping a concept they had conjured up in their minds, not the God of the Qur'an. This put them, like Christians, close to idolatry, risking their standing as true worshippers of God. For this reason, Ibn Taymiyya would spend considerable energy trying to convince scholars of the waywardness of their excessively philosophical approaches to knowledge of God. In his view, they had gone astray and were now practicing a deviant form of religion that had little to do with the message of

Muhammad. The situation was so dire that apart from a remnant of righteous believers, it was not clear that Muslims were still fit to be called Muslims. Ibn Taymiyya was not alone in castigating the religious deviation in his day,⁶ but he differed from others in aiming his critique at the religious establishment as a whole.

Christian belief: Muslim belief

Ibn Taymiyya had a penchant for stirring up religious tensions. His writings often disparage both Jews and Christians. He held special disdain for the latter. In his view, Christians only served as a sad reminder of the religiously deviant state that had existed prior to the coming of Islam. Islam had come to correct this distortion and so restore true religion, but to Ibn Taymiyya's horror, the same deviancy now existed among Muslims, the supposed followers of God's final message. Christians thus represented what Muslims should not be but had in fact become. The key issue was the distortion of monotheism. The scriptures of the Christians emphasize the oneness of God, but their leaders had fabricated ideas that had nothing to do with the knowledge that God had sent to distinguish true from false religion. As a result, Christians worshipped a creature rather than the creator, turning the message of Jesus into polytheism (*shirk*). Muslims were now guilty of the same error due to their entanglement with highly philosophized forms of theology.

Despite the fact that the Qur'an nowhere calls Christians polytheists, Ibn Taymiyya readily accused them of this most abominable of errors. He did actually believe that Christians were lost, but the aspersions he cast against them had another purpose, serving as a foil for his attacks on the deviant beliefs of Muslims. In his view, Muslims were now guilty of the same lies against God. They, too, had distorted the message of Muhammad, promoting beliefs and performing practices that smacked of polytheism. The Qur'an had strongly condemned such polytheism, but the persistence of Christian belief, now seven centuries since the promulgation of the Qur'an, raised questions of the efficacy of Islam's message among the very people who claimed to have accepted it. Ibn Taymiyya had real disdain for Christians, but his many references to them are meant as a message to Muslims, calling them to purge themselves of deviant beliefs similar to those of Christians.

Causes of religious regression

Ibn Taymiyya did not hold Christians wholly responsible for the religious regression among Muslims even if he saw their ways as a sinister source of temptation for Muslims. The ultimate cause behind the umma's loss of its monotheistic vigor lay in the scholastic antics of the learned members of the umma. They dismissed the plain meanings of scripture in favor of their own speculations about God, when it was in the plain meanings of scripture that

knowledge of God was to be found. Their philosophical rationalism only served to justify conjecture, making them guilty of replacing knowledge of God with unfounded opinion.

Ibn Taymiyya also associated the deviant beliefs he saw among Muslims with the presumptions of the spiritual masters of Sufism. By his day, they formed a network of saintly heroes whom Muslims, rulers and ruled alike, had come to view in quasi-divine terms: Despite the fact that only God was worthy of pious reverence, Muslims, according to Ibn Taymiyya, followed the every word of these spiritual masters as if revelation from God. They paid homage to them by kissing their hands and feet and obeying them unquestioningly. They looked to them for help even after death, as if they had the power to bestow blessings on disciples from their graves.⁷

Thus, for Ibn Taymiyya, Muslims had concocted a religion with no basis in the Qur'an or the teachings of the first Muslims, known as the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*). In his view, true religion was wholly restricted to the texts of scripture (which included both the Qur'an and hadith) as understood by the righteous predecessors, who were close enough to the original promulgation of the prophetic message not to have distorted it. All else amounted to false religion that risked the displeasure of God: philosophical conjectures and mystical claims to spiritual knowledge that contradicted the plain meanings of scripture as affirmed by the righteous predecessors. The following words of Ibn Taymiyya capture his conception of true religion: Islam, as a fixed phenomenon transmitted from a sacred past. Rationally compelling and fully comprehensible, it had become exposed to Jewish and Christian thinking. This, in turn, influenced Islam's scholars, who would corrupt their religion by introducing into their reading of revelation philosophizing and mysticizing tendencies that had been wholly unknown among the first Muslims:

The Qur'an was [in the time of the righteous predecessors] the leader [*imam*] they followed. There is no theological or philosophical position based on reason and no spiritual disclosure based on mystical experience to be found in the speech of any of the righteous predecessors that contradicts the Qur'an. None said that there is a fundamental contradiction between reason and tradition, that is, the Qur'an, hadith, and the sayings of the companions of the Prophet and their followers [by which he means the righteous predecessors]; or that when it comes to reason and tradition, one should be given precedence over the other; or that scripture, where it is held to contradict reason, should be interpreted metaphorically or dismissed as impossible for anyone but God to know. Nor did any of them say that he had a mystical experience or received inspiration that contradicted the Qur'an and hadith; allege that he received a message from the angel that had come to the messenger [that is, Muhammad] so as to acquire divinely revealed knowledge of monotheism from that source; or say that the saint has precedence over the prophet.

Statements as these did not appear among Muslims in the time of the righteous predecessors. They were adopted from recalcitrant Jews and Christians, some of whom say that the non-prophet has precedence over the prophet. For example, they say that the disciples of Jesus are apostles. [Ibn Taymiyya reserves this term only for prophetic messengers who conveyed a revealed message from God through the mediation of the Angel Gabriel.] They believe the disciples of Jesus have precedence over David and Solomon and even over Abraham and Moses, going so far as to call them prophets.⁸

Needless to say, the religious and political establishment looked askance at Ibn Taymiyya and his boisterous charges against the umma. He apparently enjoyed some popularity among the people of Damascus. This may have been due less to the influence of his ideas than his willingness to face the Mongols when they descended upon the city in 1300 while its governing elite fled for their lives. However, he clashed with various notables and ended up in prison on several occasions in both Egypt and Syria. He was put on trial for his religious views more than once and would eventually die in the Citadel of Damascus in 1328. He had been locked up there for the last two years of his life for issuing a legal opinion condemning the widespread practice of visiting the gravesites of saints for the sake of intercession.

The scholarly background

Ibn Taymiyya lived at a time when the self-confidence of the umma had been shaken by unprecedented threats from infidel forces. There were Crusaders from the West, but the greater menace came from the East in the form of the Mongols. This is not to say that Ibn Taymiyya's ideas were merely a response to political challenges. They also took shape as a challenge to important scholarly developments that had occurred within Islam over the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that is, since the death of Ghazali in 1111. Due in large part to Ghazali's efforts to integrate the intellectual achievements of Avicenna into the matrix of prophecy, philosophy was no longer simply the passion of a courtly elite. It had now become thoroughly integrated into the curriculum of religious study in Islam, shaping concepts of knowledge across all disciplines from theology to mysticism. It is this that Ibn Taymiyya found abhorrent, as if the logic of man rather than the wisdom of God might determine the meanings and purposes of religion.

To name only a handful of the scholarly virtuosi since the death of Ghazali: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), albeit a complex thinker,⁹ did much to complete the synthesis of philosophy and prophecy that Ghazali had initiated, securing for the mind the role of arbiter of all truths both human and divine. Ibn Rushd, that is, Averroes (d. 1198), inspired by a different type of rationality, rejected Ghazali's ideas on causality (at least those spelled out in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), even if he was not fully cognizant of

Ghazali's own complex views on philosophy.¹⁰ The thought of one of Averroes' own mentors, Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185), bears the marks of Ghazali's synthesis of philosophy, religion, and mysticism (even if he, too, critiqued Ghazali). This suggests that Averroes' rejection of Ghazali may have been partly shaped by the theo-political interests of the Almohads, who ruled over the Islamic West at that time. Finally, Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) greatly advanced Ghazali's project, elaborating a theory of monism that saw all existence as a reflection of God's. All of this highlights the fact that Ibn Taymiyya's challenge to the highly philosophizing theology of his day cannot be fully understood without taking note of the sea change that the achievements of Ghazali had brought about in Islam's scholarly circles. Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya ridicules the so-called law of interpretation (*qānūn al-ta'wīl*), attributed to al-Razi, which he saw as a brazen dismissal of revelation for philosophical logic.

These developments posed considerable challenges to the heirs of Ibn Hanbal, whose teachings Ibn Taymiyya often but not always associated with those of the righteous predecessors. Ibn Hanbal, it will be remembered from the first chapter, had refused to accept the caliphal command to recognize the Qur'an as created rather than uncreated (eternal). He was in principle averse to saying anything at all about the literal wordings of scripture, especially when it came to its descriptions of the godhead. His writings against his theological opponents do include scriptural commentary, but his exegesis is essentially limited to refuting allegations of contradictions in the Qur'an.¹¹ He did not see fit to undertake theological speculation on ultimate meanings behind the literal wordings of scripture. As a result, he and his immediate successors were committed to anthropomorphism, the idea that God has bodily features. This view appeared more and more peculiar at least amidst the increasingly rationalizing tendencies within Islam's scholarly circles. The heirs of Ibn Hanbal would not forego their anthropomorphist convictions, but they were compelled to consider how they might present them more convincingly in light of the highly rationalist spirit of the day.

Two trends within Hanbalism emerged to meet this need. The first sought to interpret away the literal wordings of anthropomorphist texts. (Ibn Hanbal would have refused to do so.) This trend, represented by the likes of Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200), stopped short of speculating on the ultimate meanings of scriptural verse, but it did rebut the idea that there was anything corporeal about the godhead.¹² Ibn al-Jawzī did not turn to allegorical interpretation to resolve the dilemma but relied instead on what could be called philological theology. In essence, he argued that if one followed the rules of language, one would see that even a literal reading of the anthropomorphist texts did not support the idea that God has a body. In addition, he dismissed the authenticity of prophetic sayings whose corporeal descriptions of God could not be so easily revised. The second trend, represented by the likes of Ibn Qudāma (d. 1223), sought to counter non-literal readings of anthropomorphist texts by insisting that the first Muslims, pillars of apostolic authority, had read them without speculating on their meanings.¹³ This was to take interpretative

authority over the texts of revelation out of the hands of contemporary scholars, limiting it exclusively to the first generations of Muslims, known as the righteous predecessors. This effectively made interpretation of scripture a closed case. The upshot was a piety that looked to a past age, now idealized, for knowledge of God. The companions of the Prophet and their immediate followers, it was held, had not simply conveyed the texts of revelation to future generations. They had also passed down knowledge about how these texts should be read. In reality, it was impossible to stick to this rule, since it was based on the dubious assumption that the first Muslims had themselves reached consensus on how the texts of revelation should be read. Still, restricting interpretive authority over scripture to the earliest period of Islam was one way to counter the widespread scholarly trends of the day to read the texts of revelation through a philosophical and mystical lens.

Ibn Taymiyya, although fiercely independent in his thinking, had great esteem for Ibn Hanbal, whose outlook he felt adhered closely to the religion that Muhammad had conveyed to his companions, who, in turn, had passed it on intact to their immediate followers. His thinking shows the influence of the two trends, noted above, that had begun to crystallize among the partisans of Ibn Hanbal. Ibn Taymiyya's lifework is marked by a kind of rationality, but it is not the rationality of philosophical theology, which Ibn Taymiyya found too static in its thinking about God. It is true, as noted earlier, that he had a static understanding of religion as a set of clear truths, agreed upon by the generation of righteous predecessors closest to the Prophet. Religion for Ibn Taymiyya, while in need of explanation in order to be convincing to the mind, was not open to reinterpretation or rationalization. In contrast, his view of God was quite dynamic. For him, God was ever in active relation with his creatures, due to the mercy he had prescribed for himself. They, in turn, were obliged to know him, obey him, and love him apart from conjecture.

Reason: master of revelation

Ibn Taymiyya was particularly troubled by what was referred to earlier as the law of interpretation (*qānūn al-ta'wīl*), a measure for affirming that the wordings of scripture do not contradict standards of reason. For Ibn Taymiyya, the law of interpretation was based on flawed logic.¹⁴ In his view, the mind was a tool to make sense of scripture, so how could it ever be said to contradict it? Could something contradict what it was meant to confirm? God's message was in no way unreasonable, but it did not need philosophical reasoning to be rational. The gist of the law of interpretation ran as follows: We cannot know the message of scripture without reason. This means that reason has a central role in our knowledge of scripture. This, in turn, gives reason authority over scripture in general but especially when its wordings contradict reason. When such conflict occurs, notably around ambiguous verses, one should prefer a metaphorical to a literal reading.

Ibn Taymiyya turned the argument on its head: If scripture is only known by reason, then to deny scripture is to deny reason. Thus, when there is conflict, priority is to be given to the plain meanings of scripture over human rationalization of the text. Indeed, the fact that scholars disagree on many issues is all the more reason to trust the rationality of scripture over that of philosophy. In this regard, Ibn Taymiyya is effectively charging the scholars of his day of willfully promoting the idea of the equivalence of evidence as discussed in chapter two.¹⁵ For example, Islam includes descriptions about God that one would not know without revelation, such as reports that he sees, hears, and speaks. Philosophically minded scholars, according to Ibn Taymiyya, say that one cannot know such descriptions with certainty simply from hearing them recited in the Qur'an. Certainty only comes with scholastic reasoning of one kind or another. For Muslims to know the meaning of scripture when it says that God sees, hears, and speaks, they would have to be masters of scholastic reasoning. This, Ibn Taymiyya retorts, stands in opposition to anything one finds in scripture and the teachings of the righteous predecessors. One need not be skilled in the niceties of scholastic argumentation to be a Muslim with sound knowledge of God's message, including the attributes it ascribes to God.

Moreover, scholars, Ibn Taymiyya argues, do not themselves live up to the scholastic standards they claim as necessary for knowledge of God's message. The conclusions even of skilled masters of scholastic reasoning do not go beyond conjecture. Evidence for this lies in the fact that a single scholar will maintain that his argument is sound in one place and false in another. Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya says, there are those whose methodology is entirely tainted by such contradiction. As a result, each party in a theological disputation, both allegedly using scholastic argumentation, claims his position has the status of necessary knowledge when it is the exact opposite of that of his opponent (*wa-ḥatta qad yadda'ī kullun min al-mutanāẓirayn al-'ilm al-darūrī bi-naqīd ma idda'ā l-ākhar*).¹⁶ How could two opposing arguments both have the status of necessary knowledge? Alas, Ibn Taymiyya concludes, theological discourse is consumed by hairsplitting minutiae that have no backing from the Qur'an and still does not yield clear conclusions. However, in truth, despite the presumptions of scholars, believers are not obliged to know things beyond their intellectual capacity. For this reason, the righteous predecessors did not see fit to consider many issues, thereby setting no precedent that would oblige believers to delve into theological speculation. They were rational but only demanded that people know what they had the capacity to know so long as it corresponded to the truth. Ibn Taymiyya is essentially saying that the enterprise of scholastic theology is a sham if it does not start from the clarity of divine speech.

Ibn Taymiyya did not, of course, call for the rejection of reason—he was trying to restore it—but he did call for its direct engagement with scripture apart from scholastic conjecturing. Rational arguments have place in theological reflection but cannot contradict the Qur'an, since, as noted above, it is

reason that is valorized by scripture rather than the other way around. To ensure that scholastic argumentation had no false mastery over God's message, Ibn Taymiyya had to deny interpretative authority to the scholars of his day, who in his view had fallen under the sway of philosophy by restricting such authority exclusively to the first Muslims, as seen earlier in the case of Ibn Qudama. This is not to say that Ibn Taymiyya adhered to his own rule. Indeed, he applies his own form of scholastic reasoning to scripture in ways that go beyond anything known to the righteous predecessors.

Moreover, to support his claim that the first Muslims were of one accord in their reading of the texts of revelation, he had to undertake some philological acrobatics of his own. The statements of the righteous predecessors show divergent interpretations of the Qur'an. However, according to Ibn Taymiyya, these statements only seem contradictory. The dilemma, he claims, lies at the level of language: If one understood the language of the righteous predecessors, one would realize that they were of one accord.¹⁷ They might use different words for a single meaning, for example, or the same word with different meanings. Just because the first Muslims seem to have disagreed does not mean they actually did. In any event, such details were secondary to Ibn Taymiyya's primary goal, namely, undermining the false mastery of scholastic reasoning over scripture. To do so, he needed a principle to counter the law of interpretation associated with al-Razi that elevated philosophical reasoning above God's message. Building upon relatively late trends in Hanbalism, Ibn Taymiyya restricted interpretative authority over scripture to the righteous predecessors, undercutting the supremacy of the law of interpretation.

Ibn Taymiyya's skepticism

Ibn Taymiyya seems rather out of place in Islam in this period. Ghazali had pushed things as far as they could go. Balancing the truths of the physical order with those of the spiritual one, he had come up with a formula that combined, first, great confidence in the power of the mind to know the workings of the world on its own terms without the need for the clarifying assistance of a message from God, and, second, skeptical reservations about the mind's ability to comprehend the very same workings of the world, not on their own terms but in terms of God's relation to them. Revelation was needed for knowledge of God's relation to the world but not for knowledge of the world on its own terms. The mind was vital, but so was revelation. What more was to be said? Scholars from al-Razi to Ibn 'Arabi opened new vistas but still operated within the intellectual legacy established by Ghazali.

Ibn Taymiyya, it should be noted, had little impact on Islam's learned circles until recent times. His writings, while voluminous, influenced only a small number of disciples,¹⁸ and even they did not always agree with him. His writings did not have prominent place in the religious curriculum of Islam's centers of learning over the centuries. Today, however, Ibn Taymiyya is considered the precursor of a vibrant form of Islam known as Salafism. His

global influence extends in divergent ways from terrorist figures to mid-level bureaucrats in government ministries and middle-class youth in search of employment in weak economies. It is impossible to understand the contemporary phenomenon of Salafism without reference to Ibn Taymiyya. While that is a fascinating story in itself, our goal is to consider the thought of Ibn Taymiyya in its own context as a type of skepticism inspired by the Qur'an that took expression within the scholarly conditions of his own day.

The fact that Ibn Taymiyya was so keen to undermine the power of logic has led one scholar to liken him in that regard to Sextus Empiricus, one of the key sources of our knowledge of ancient skepticism.¹⁹ Others may seek to trace a more direct connection between Sextus Empiricus to Ibn Taymiyya, but that is not our aim. Rather, we seek to explore the way in which Ibn Taymiyya looked not to a pre-Islamic heritage but to the Qur'an itself for inspiration for his skeptical attacks on Christians and Christian-like Muslims. While Ibn Taymiyya's rejection of logic shares something with ancient skepticism, our interest is in the way skeptical attitudes took forms unique to Islam. As noted in the introduction, the Qur'an displays a skeptical attitude towards the beliefs of its varied audience, casting suspicion especially on faith that has been unthinkingly inherited from one's forebears. It is this kind of scriptural rhetoric that is central to Ibn Taymiyya's effort to put into doubt what he sees as false forms of religion inflicting the umma. His skepticism is one with a highly polemical bent. Given the growing scholarly commitment to the study of philosophy, he had no choice but to attack the power of philosophical reasoning, logic, as part of his goal of enthroning the rationality of scripture.

What does it mean to speak of a skepticism inspired by the Qur'an? It is not a skepticism that casts doubt on the power of the mind to know God. Ibn Taymiyya, it could be argued, has more faith than Ghazali in the mind's ability to grasp the message of the Qur'an and know God. Rather, a skepticism inspired by the Qur'an is one that casts doubt on the power of the mind to attain knowledge of God that contradicts God's plain message. Scripture, for Ibn Taymiyya, includes both the Qur'an and hadith. Indeed, he almost includes the sayings of the righteous predecessors within the scope of scripture. Ibn Taymiyya saw it as his task to refute all arguments for knowledge of God that were at odds with the plain meanings of scripture. For this purpose, he divided arguments about God into two classes: those based on conjecture (*ẓann*) and those that enjoyed the status of knowledge (*'ilm*). As noted in the introduction, *ẓann* in this context should not be confused with the juridical usage of the term. Here, it is a scriptural concept: Some arguments about God are based on conjecture, specifically, those that raise questions about the plain meanings of scripture and thus the trustworthiness of its prophetic messenger. In contrast, arguments that are consistent with the plain sense of scripture have the status of knowledge. This does not mean one does not have to think in order to understand what the Qur'an means, for example, when it says that God determines all things, but one could not contradict the

plain sense of scripture: One could question what human reasoning conjectured about God but not what God clearly said about himself in scripture. No grounds existed for metaphorical readings of scripture.

The term in Arabic for conjecture, *ẓann*, has different meanings, many of which can be found in Ibn Taymiyya's writings. More neutrally, it means simply "thought." It can also have significance in the realm of legal reasoning. Prescribed actions remain valid despite uncertainty. For example, you might "suppose" (*ẓann*) that you are praying in the direction of Mecca, but you have no way of verifying it for certain. Your prayer is still valid despite the uncertainty. However, in the Qur'an, *ẓann* has a specific sense, designating beliefs based on conjecture rather than knowledge. Ibn Taymiyya uses the term in this sense in his polemical undertakings.

It is worth noting that Ibn Taymiyya himself does not entirely limit his conception of knowledge to scripture. Knowledge for him is whatever the righteous predecessors held to be knowledge of God. Thus, while inspired by the Qur'an, Ibn Taymiyya associates religious knowledge exclusively with the views of the righteous predecessors. All else is conjecture, including, in his estimation, the bulk of what Muslims in his day believed. In his view, arguments about God that made use of conjecture had become prevalent. Based on philosophizing and mysticizing tendencies, they diverged from the teachings of the righteous predecessors:

Later scholars, including the practitioners of theological speculation and mystical disclosure, do not know the way of the companions of the Prophet and their immediate followers [that is, the righteous predecessors]. They base many important religious matters on conjecture [*ẓann*] as to the consensus of the companions without knowing the sayings of the righteous predecessors at all.²⁰

Thus, in the language of Ibn Taymiyya, conjecture stands for all thinking about God that is inconsistent with the religion of the righteous predecessors. The word as it appears in the Qur'an does not have this specific sense, but Ibn Taymiyya spins the word to make it seem so. Important for our purposes is the fact that he defines as conjecture any new thinking about God that either appeared after the period of the righteous predecessors or that they denounced in their own day:

Then at the end of the age of the companions of the Prophet, a group began to advocate for the idea of freewill [over against the idea that all is determined by God's will]. The origin of their innovation lies in the inability of their minds to believe in Allah's preordination of all things, his command and prohibition [that is, *shari'a*], and his promise of paradise and threat of hell. They *conjectured* [that is, followed *ẓann*] that that is impossible. They had believed in the religion of Allah, his command and prohibition, and his promise and threat, but they *conjectured* that if

that were the case, he could not have known before commanding [that is, before issuing the teachings of shari'a] who would obey and who would disobey. They *conjectured* that it would not be fitting for the One who knows what will happen [that is, God] to command [that is, issue moral directives], while knowing that those who hear the command will disobey rather than obey. [In other words, it would be illogical for God to communicate his message to those whom he knew by his own preordination would not accept it.] They also *conjectured* that if he knew [that is, preordained] that they [sinners] would be corrupt, it would not have been fitting for him to have created those that he knew would be corrupt [and thus worthy of punishment]. When their statement denying divine preordination reached the companions of the Prophet, they roundly denied it and disassociated themselves from those making the argument.²¹

In all of this, Ibn Taymiyya's chief target is the logic of philosophical theology and its objections to the plain meanings of scripture. By his day, as noted earlier, philosophy had had a noticeable impact on theological reflection. Ibn Taymiyya actually had a keen eye for the arc of Islam's intellectual history and argued that philosophy was a latecomer in Muslim thinking on God. It was absurd to give it preponderant weight in theological discourse. In essence, he was calling his fellow scholars, who had become so enamored of philosophy, mere upstarts. Who were they to claim greater knowledge of God's message than the prophet who had received it and his companions who had passed it down to succeeding generations and, ultimately, to them?

These people of theology, who are veiled and separated [from the source of prophecy], latecomers, confused [*ḥayārā*], and exhausted [by their scholastic speculations], how might they be more knowledgeable about Allah, his names and attributes, and have greater mastery of the issue of his essence and his revealed signs [scriptural verses] than those who were the first of their scholarly predecessors, that is: the emigrants [who fled with the Prophet from Mecca to Medina] and their supporters [who received them in Medina]; those who immediately succeeded them with good intention as heirs to the companions; and the successors of the messengers, the banners of guidance, and lamps in darkness. Scripture began with them, and they began with scripture. It spoke through them, and they spoke through it. They are the ones upon whom Allah bestowed knowledge and wisdom, marking them out among all the followers of the prophets, not to mention all the nations that have no scripture. How might the best generation of the umma be more deficient in knowledge and wisdom—especially in knowledge of Allah and the rules regarding his names and signs [scriptural verses]—than those much smaller [much more recent] than they? How might the young chickens of philosophy, the followers of Indian and Greek thought, the heirs of the Magi, polytheists, the misguided Jews, Christians,

Zoroastrians, and their ilk, be more knowledgeable about God than the heirs of the prophets and the faithful people of the Qur'an?²²

A sticking point over the centuries, seen already in the first chapter, involved the attributes of God as revealed in scripture. Verses of the Qur'an state that God is located in a place (on his throne or in heaven), suggesting he has a body. Prophetic tradition (hadith) also makes enigmatic statements, for example, that God holds the hearts of humans in two of his fingers, and that God had once placed his foot in the fire of hell.²³ The scholars of Islam, purveyors of a highly philosophical approach to theology, balked at such humanlike and thus illogical characterizations of God, the source of all being. But in doing so, they were awarding themselves interpretive authority over scripture, effectively placing themselves above the prophet who had conveyed such description. This, for Ibn Taymiyya, amounted to a farce, nothing more than the machinations of conjecture (*ẓann*) with no basis in real knowledge:

It is not possible for succeeding generations to have more knowledge than the righteous predecessors as some stupid people say who do not know the stature of the righteous predecessors and even do not know Allah and his messenger. Those religious innovators give precedence to the way of philosophically minded latecomers and their ilk over that of the predecessors, doing so on the basis of their *conjecturing* that the way of the predecessors amounted only to faith in the literal wording of the Qur'an and hadith without understanding it, and that the path of the latecomers is to derive the meanings of the scriptural texts that are the actual truths of the texts, doing so by varied kinds of metaphorical interpretation and odd philosophical language. *This is corrupt conjecture*, resulting in creeds the content of which would necessarily result in the end of Islam.²⁴

The role of skepticism

Ibn Taymiyya knew that there was no point in trying to counter philosophically minded objections to the plain meaning of scripture by appealing to scripture. Doing so would easily be dismissed as circular reasoning. He would thus have to take down the foundation of philosophical theology, namely, syllogistic reasoning, on its own terms. It was a daunting task, but one that Ibn Taymiyya was ready to undertake. He would have to show the deficiencies in what people took to be the very foundation of knowledge. He would have to show that logic-based argumentation amounted to mere conjecture. He took inspiration from the Qur'an:

There are those who in their heart believe that decisive rational evidence can be established to deny the attributes of God [as revealed in scripture] or some of them; to deny God's creation of everything [as revealed in

scripture] and also his commands and prohibitions [that is, shari‘a]; to show the impossibility of bodily resurrection [as revealed in scripture]; and other things. There is no point arguing with them on the basis of the Qur‘an and Sunna. One has to show the corruption of their [philosophically based] objections. Those with complete belief in God and his messenger and decisive knowledge of the intent of the prophetic messenger are certain that his message is indubitable and know that arguments at odds with it are necessarily refuted. [He then quotes Q 42:16]: “Those who argue about Allah after having responded to him, their argument is refuted before their Lord. Wrath is upon them and theirs is a severe punishment.”²⁵

What was it about syllogistic reasoning that Ibn Taymiyya found so troubling? If scripture could not contradict reason, then the Qur‘an was to be read metaphorically wherever it seemed illogical. For Ibn Taymiyya, this was to imply that the Prophet and his followers did not know what God had meant when he revealed to them the words of scripture. It was as if to claim that true knowledge of the meaning of God’s message had to await the rise of philosophy in Islam. And yet philosophical analysis only yielded conclusions at odds with scripture. This effectively made the Prophet delusional, implying that he said things he did not understand. Had God left it to philosophers to determine the true meaning of scripture? This would give philosophers a higher place than prophets in the hierarchy of knowledge of God!

Ibn Taymiyya had a detailed knowledge of the philosophical heritage. His rejection of it is thus not at all simplistic,²⁶ making it difficult to label him a nominalist. (Indeed, he argued that the human soul naturally inclined to knowledge and love of God and also to knowledge of good and evil even without prophetic guidance. Of course, in his view, the nature of humans, untouched by corrupt doctrine, was tantamount to Islam.)²⁷ Rather, he noticed the internal contradictions of logic and the disagreements among philosophers themselves. As a result of his readings of Islam’s scholarly heritage, he concluded that it was the philosophers who were delusional when it came to knowledge of God. They, along with those who used philosophical argumentation in the arena of theology, did not know what they were saying. Thus, across his writings, Ibn Taymiyya seeks to expose the absurdities that result when syllogistic reasoning is applied to theological reflection. For example, philosophers claim that one cannot know concepts without definitions. But this traps them in circular reasoning: If our concepts come from definitions, then those definitions must be based on prior definitions, and so on *ad infinitum*. We would be caught in a never-ending regression of definitions upon definitions. Ibn Taymiyya counters that we actually know things without definitions. We know that snow is snow, for example, even without a complete definition of it. If knowledge of the concept of snow required a complete definition, including definitions of the concepts underlying the definition, very few people would know what snow is. But this is manifestly false.

All people know what snow is without consulting a logician. For Ibn Taymiyya, the realities of existence, including the wordings of scripture, have a plain sense to them, obviating the need for syllogistic reasoning. Indeed, argumentation based on the logic of philosophy that claims to offer final definitions of the realities of existence only amounts to conjecture. To Ibn Taymiyya, it was the philosophers, not the prophets, who did not know what they were saying about God.

Ibn Taymiyya sharply criticized the philosophical position that distinguished the identity of a thing from its existence, first advanced by Avicenna,²⁸ the idea that the truth of a thing lies in its identity, something philosophers determined according to philosophical method. At the same time, philosophers claimed that the identity of a thing, even if they determined it through the power of logic, had a reality apart from the mind. This reality was the essence of a thing, its truth, what it was, even apart from its concrete existence. In other words, the truths of things existed in philosophical categories apart from their concrete existence. It is the identity of snow—a philosophical category—that constitutes its true reality apart from its concrete existence. For Ibn Taymiyya, this view dangerously awards the logic of philosophy the privilege of determining truth (leaving scripture out in the snow). It was thus necessary to show that such a distinction amounted to mere conjecture.

He achieved this by arguing that the logic that led philosophers to distinguish the identity of a thing from its essence was actually illogical. Having posited the distinction between identity and existence, philosophers went on to define the identity of a thing as its essence. Thus, even apart from its concrete existence, a thing could be known in its essence. However, when it took on concrete existence, a thing assumed accidental (that is, non-essential) qualities in addition to its essence. For example, a human might be tall or short but he or she was still essentially human. One's height was thus accidental to one's essence. However, as Ibn Taymiyya noted, there was a serious flaw in this thinking. What were the qualities of a thing that belonged to its essence as opposed to its accidental qualities? For example, the human being, in contrast to other animals, was held to be essentially rational. Thus, the quality of rationality was a necessary characteristic of the human being in both its essential identity and its concrete existence. But what did logic say about eating? Was eating essential or accidental to the identity of being human? Was laughing essential or accidental to the identity of being human? Philosophers themselves did not agree.

In point of fact, Ibn Taymiyya notes, we come to know something not as a philosophical category but in its concrete existence, and we speak about it not in the supposedly universal terms of logic but according to the particular conventions of language. Thus, before speaking about something, we need to specify the words we use to name it in its particular existence. Indeed, the definition of a thing is simply the name we use for it in its particular existence.²⁹ All of this, of course, was to tilt the scale in favor of the words of

scripture, including its words for God, over the claims of philosophy. Scripture, which spoke of God in particular ways, was a surer path to knowledge of God than logic. Logic, for its part, dealt in universal concepts that had no concrete existence. It therefore amounted to nothing but conjecture.³⁰

Ibn Taymiyya launches repeated attacks on syllogistic reasoning and its claims across his many writings, devoting a monumental work exclusively to this purpose: *Averting Contradiction Between Reason and Revelation*. There, in attack after attack, he seeks to show that philosophically oriented theology amounts to mere guesswork, that is, conjecture, and has nothing to do with real knowledge. He thus does not limit his attacks to philosophy. All religious thinking that raises doubts about the truth of scripture is reduced to the status of conjecture (*ẓann*) as opposed to knowledge (*ilm*). Ibn Taymiyya attacked scholars of theology for concocting doctrines with no scriptural basis. He attacked the system of sainthood in Islam that in his view encouraged believers to make lords of human creatures, obeying them blindly in exchange for intercession on Judgment Day. On what basis could such practices be justified in Islam? For Ibn Taymiyya, they were based on nothing but conjecture about the status of these allegedly saintly figures. He attacked the Shi'a for the quasi-divine stature they awarded to their imams—again, a belief based on mere conjecture. He attacked non-Muslims, especially Christians, for following beliefs that in his view were wholly based on conjecture; they were nothing but a bundle of unfounded suppositions about the divinity of Jesus. He reserved his most ferocious attacks for the branch of Islam known as Isma'ilism, calling for jihad against its adherents for its groundless claim that the age of shari'a had ended.

What was the ultimate motive behind the attacks of this learned yet bellicose polemicist? In his writings on jihad, Ibn Taymiyya maintained that the Mongols were but a tool in the hands of God.³¹ The havoc they had wreaked on the Abode of Islam was God's way of punishing Muslims for betraying the prophetic message. In Ibn Taymiyya's view, Muslims had become no better than Jews and Christians, following a religion based on human guesswork rather than divine revelation. By subordinating scripture to the flawed logic of philosophers, by deifying saints and imams with no authorization from scripture, Muslims had turned their scholarly and spiritual leaders into lords, the very charge the Qur'an levels against Jews and Christians (Q 9:31). Muslims, especially their leaders, were now guilty of the theological error that had led Jews and Christians to subordinate the message of their prophetic texts to the human conjecturing of their leaders. As a result, what Jews and Christians followed, the Qur'an implies, is not the knowledge originally revealed by God. This situation had necessitated a final message from God to settle the matter once and for all: the Qur'an, a divine communiqué so clear that it would defy human attempts to falsify its message. And yet this is what Muslims had done, bringing upon themselves the wrath of God in the form of the Mongol onslaughts.

A prominent theme in the Qur'an is its discourse on Jews and Christians. In his reading of the Qur'an, Ibn Taymiyya concluded that God had become angry with the Jews for knowing God and his commands but failing to follow

them. Christians, for their part, were greatly devoted to God but had fallen into theological error. They exerted great efforts to worship God but did so without real knowledge of him. Now, Ibn Taymiyya claims, such religious decadence marked the community of Muslims, giving God reason to be angered and to subject them to the consequences of their own ignorance. The Mongols were the proof that this was so. For this reason, across his varied writings, Ibn Taymiyya repeatedly compares the state of Muslims to that of Jews and Christians as narrated in the Qur'an. He finds Christians especially problematic. The Jews may be bad people, opposing the directives of their own scripture, but they had not fallen into the polytheism of the Christians. At the same time, despite the Christian-like decline of the umma into quasi-polytheistic ways, Ibn Taymiyya insists that a righteous remnant of Muslims continues to adhere to the message of God, just as the followers of Muhammad had in their day formed a righteous remnant of true believers in contrast to wayward Jews and Christians.

Ibn Taymiyya is targeting the religious scholars of his age mainly for philosophically imbued thinking that strips the plain meanings of scripture of truth, turning its message into a socially useful lie for the masses to believe. Thus, in his view, the real threat to the umma was not the Mongols but its own scholarly leaders. For this reason, Ibn Taymiyya took it upon himself to recall the umma to the logic of God. He did this by strongly coloring all his writings with scriptural verse, redirecting skeptical strategies that the Qur'an had deployed against the religiously deviant believers of its day now against his Muslim adversaries in his own day.

Modeling himself after the Qur'an, Ibn Taymiyya set out to attack all belief that was based on human devices rather than divine authority. Central to his argument is the idea that there could be no affinity, no likeness, no resemblance between God and his human creatures. Philosophers thought that God's mind worked like theirs. Saints thought that a quasi-divine core existed at the interior of their being where God communicated special knowledge to them. For Ibn Taymiyya, this kind of thinking, which suggested that humans bore some resemblance to God, was but a pretext to claim divine status for beliefs and practices that had no basis in God's word. Inspired by the rhetoric of the Qur'an, which he quotes to no end throughout his writings, Ibn Taymiyya calls the umma to the logic of the Qur'an. One is not to guess about God but rather to heed the texts of revelation. Indeed, the more one fabricates things about God through human devices, the farther one is from God.

The skepticism of the Qur'an

Ibn Taymiyya's skeptical approach to the deviant beliefs of Muslims mimics the rhetoric of the Qur'an. As noted earlier, he had a very precise notion of the scholastic conjecturing he repeatedly castigates, identifying it with theological argumentation at odds with the views of the righteous predecessors. The Qur'an, of course, does not speak of the concept of righteous predecessors but

does deploy a rich array of skeptical terminology to challenge the beliefs of its varied audience. Its goal is to show that what they think they know about God is actually nothing but conjecture (*ẓann*) whereas what the Qur'an reveals is real knowledge.

A major aspect of the skeptical strategy of the Qur'an is its use of the Arabic word for conjecture (*ẓann*), which is contrasted with knowledge (*'ilm*), that is, the knowledge conveyed by revelation. The word is sometimes used generally and sometimes in reference to a specific group. For example, Q 6:116 says, "If you obey most of those on earth, they will mislead you from the way of Allah. They only follow *ẓann*." Similarly, the Qur'an responds to those who mock the message of Muhammad by claiming that God willed that they be polytheists. Q 6:148 offers a rebuttal: "Do you have knowledge [*'ilm*] to show us? You only follow *ẓann*. You are just guessing."

The Qur'an applies the word especially to those who make up things about God. For example, in reference to the three idols that the Arabs of Muhammad's day associated with God as his daughters (al-Lāt, al-Uzza, and Manāt), Q 53:23 says that they are not real but simply names given to them by their ancestors, who were led by *ẓann*. The word in the Qur'an thus refers to theological error, muddled thinking about God, and the so-called age of ignorance prior to the coming of Islam (Q 3:154). In this last sense, it denotes a tribal mindset that attributes control over human affairs to powers other than God. For example, the Qur'an notes how the followers of Muhammad lost their faith in God's power when the tide of battle turned against them in their struggle with the polytheists. Q 33:10 says, "Remember when they came at you from above and below you. Your eyes swerved. Your hearts reached your throats. And you began to make conjectures [*ẓunūn*] about Allah."

More generally, the term describes those who reject the prophetic messengers sent by God (for example, Q 6:186 and Q 28:38–39). It implies a lack of knowledge about the truth of the life to come (for example, Q 6:148 and Q 53:28). For example, Q 45:24 states, "The disbelievers say, 'There is nothing but this life below. We die. We live. Only fate destroys us.' They have no knowledge about that. They are only using *ẓann*." The word is also applied to those who fail to see the purpose of the universe as God's creation, as Q 38:27 says, "We [God] did not create the heavens and earth and what is between them without purpose. That is the *ẓann* of those who disbelieve." And those who believe in what they conjecture will be punished, as Q 48:6 says, "He punishes male and female hypocrites; males and females who associate other beings with Allah [that is, polytheists]; and those whose *ẓann* about Allah is evil-intentioned. Upon them is evil misfortune. Allah is angered with them and curses them and has prepared hell for them as a calamitous destiny."

Skepticism inspired by the Qur'an

Ibn Taymiyya's writings are heavily marked by the skeptical tactics of the Qur'an, which he uses as a strategy against Muslims who in his view have

adulterated their beliefs and practices with human fabrications, including philosophical conjecture and the practices of Sufism that drew upon the passions of the body to become close to God. However, to justify his use of the Qur'an's skeptical rhetoric against fellow Muslims, Ibn Taymiyya has to associate them with the Jews and Christians of the Qur'an. Once this association is made, he can charge them with conjecture (*ẓann*), implying deviance from the message of Islam in its pristine form. In this way, he accuses Muslims of the error that the Qur'an directs against Jews and Christians for subordinating the plain meanings of scripture to human conjecture.

The charge of conjecture in the Qur'an is directed more pointedly against those Arabs who associated other beings with God.³² They were polytheists of a kind, associating their tribal deities with God as the chief deity of the pantheon of pre-Islamic Arabia. However, there were no such people in Ibn Taymiyya's day. The problem, in his view, lay with deviant forms of piety that claimed to have a scriptural basis, whether Jewish, Christian, or even Muslim. As noted earlier, Ibn Taymiyya identified Christianity as a form of polytheism (*shirk*), and the theme of conjecture versus real knowledge features in his writings on Christianity. For example, in one of his works, *The Necessity of the Straight Path in Opposition to the People of Hell*, Ibn Taymiyya's main target is deviant beliefs of Muslims, especially devotees to saintly figures who pay them homage in life and death. However, before unleashing his venom on these practices, he writes at length in disparagement of Jews and Christians, especially Christians. In this way, he hopes to associate the deviant beliefs of Muslims with past recipients of scripture: Jews and Christians whose errors Islam had come to correct, and yet Muslims now imitated them. To set the stage, Ibn Taymiyya notes how the umma had long been susceptible to the influence of Jewish and Christian deviancy. Indeed, the righteous predecessors had warned of it:

As for the Jews, their infidelity lies essentially in their not acting according to their knowledge. They know the truth but do not follow it in word or deed. As for the Christians, their infidelity lies essentially in their acting without knowledge. They expend effort in various kinds of ritual worship without a law from Allah. They make statements about Allah for which they have no knowledge. For this reason, the righteous predecessors [*al-salaf*] would say: "Scholars among us who have become corrupted resemble the Jews. Worshippers among us who have become corrupted resemble the Christians."³³

Having made this connection between Judaism and Christianity, on the one hand, and corrupt forms of Islam, on the other, Ibn Taymiyya can even accuse Muslims of distorting scripture, a crucial charge the Qur'an levels against Jews and Christians. Ibn Taymiyya, it is worth noting, does not understand this to mean that the Jews and Christians had actually falsified the texts of their scriptures. (Other scholars, notably Ibn Hazm, understood

the Qur'an's charge against Jews and Christians in that sense.) Rather, Ibn Taymiyya takes the charge to mean that Jews and Christians distort the meanings of their scriptures by subjecting them to human conjecture. It is likely that he understood the Qur'an's charge against Jews and Christians in this sense for the sake of his arguments against fellow Muslims. He could not charge them with falsifying the actual texts of the Qur'an, although he does charge them with fabricating hadiths. Muslims are now like Jews and Christians for falsifying the meanings of scripture, reading the texts of revelation metaphorically, that is, on the basis of conjecture. The charge the Qur'an makes against Jews and Christians now applies to Muslims:

As for distortion of scripture in the sense of interpretation [*tahrīf al-ta'wīl*], it inflicts many groups of this umma [that is, Islam]. As for distortion of revelation [that is, the texts of scripture, which include both the Qur'an and hadith, *tahrīf al-tanzīl*], it has occurred among many people who distort the wordings of the messenger [Muhammad] and narrate reprehensible hadiths, although great scholars catch it [and so preserve the integrity of the hadith]. Some reach out to distort the Sunna [teachings of the Prophet] by conjecture [*ẓann*] they attribute to Allah: those who devise hadiths about the messenger of Allah, Allah's prayer and peace upon him, or claim that what they conjecture [*ẓann*] is a proof [of their position]. It is actually not a proof.³⁴

Muslims have thus become like Jews and Christians, distorting the meaning of scripture and even making up things about God that they then attribute to Muhammad. (In one of his writings, Ibn Taymiyya collects hadiths that he claims are actually the fabrications of storytellers. He then notes how scholars use them to justify their rationalizing conjectures about God.)³⁵ The Jews and Christians, even though they have scriptures in their possession, fail to understand the knowledge of God that they convey. Muslims have now gone down the same path despite having a book that warns against such a danger. As if distorting the message of scripture were not enough, Muslims, Ibn Taymiyya claims, have also become known for the fanatical partisanship the Qur'an imputes to Jews and Christians. At Q 2:113, Jews and Christians are depicted as accusing one another of infidelity. This, Ibn Taymiyya says, now features in Islam: Muslims have become divided into a host of groups that differ according to doctrines, laws and customs, and spiritual hierarchy. All claim that theirs alone is the way to salvation, consigning other Muslims to hell.³⁶ One could ask whether this is not what Ibn Taymiyya is himself doing, but he would say he is only setting the record straight, calling the umma back to the religion of God.

It is not just the unlearned masses that Ibn Taymiyya accuses of deviation from the message of Muhammad. He also likens the scholarly leaders of the umma to Jews and Christians. For example, envy is one of the blameworthy qualities Ibn Taymiyya attributes to Jews and Christians. Now, he says, it also

afflicts even the scholars of Islam, who apparently are prone to become envious of peers whose scholarly work has greater impact on the umma: "Some of those belonging to the classes of knowledge [that is, the ranks of religious scholars] are now tested [that is, afflicted] by envy of those whom God has guided to knowledge that is beneficial to the umma and to the performance of good works."³⁷

Having associated deviant Muslims with the Jews and Christians of the Qur'an, Ibn Taymiyya takes the next step, arguing that the only way to adhere to true Islam is by opposing all that Jews and Christians do, even things they do that bring no apparent harm to Muslims.³⁸ To be a Muslim, then, means to oppose Jews and Christians. Simply associating with the ways of Jews and Christians is harmful and must be opposed. The Jews and Christians of the Qur'an serve Ibn Taymiyya as a foil against which to highlight the religious deviancy of fellow Muslims, but this, in turn, implies that to free oneself of corrupt belief, one has to disassociate oneself entirely from any connection to Jews and Christians:

This deviancy is a matter that people's natures have assumed and Satan has adorned. The slave [that is, the slave of God, meaning the Muslim in this context] is commanded to invoke Allah the Praiseworthy continuously and to be guided to uprightness that has in it no Jewishness and no Christianity at all.³⁹

Further skepticism: the question of love

This, then, is the crux of Ibn Taymiyya's skeptical attitude: If you are at all like Jews and Christians and you are Muslim, you are following a piety based on conjecture rather than knowledge. This idea echoes across all his writings, not only those composed primarily for polemical purposes. That is, the accusation of conjecture does not feature only in his words against Christians. It also features, for example, in his writings on love, that is, God's love for creation. Here, too, Muslims, following Jewish and Christian conceptions of love, have fallen into error.

The long-standing debates about love in Islam revolve around the divine attributes of will and of love.⁴⁰ Does God will into existence what he loves? Does he love what he wills? Some verses in the Qur'an state that all things are the result of God's will, while others say that God loves piety and righteousness and hates impiety and sinfulness. Does this mean that God wills both what he loves *and* what he hates? Muslims were divided on the issue. One group, associated with the school of Mu'tazilism, claimed that God does not will all things. Humans, they claim, not God, are responsible for their deeds of piety and impiety and will be accordingly rewarded and punished for those deeds. But this was to neglect the verses of the Qur'an that say that all things are the result of God's will in preference for those that say God loves piety and hates impiety. Was this not to distort the message of God?

The other group, associated with the school of Ash'arism, emphasized the verses that say that God wills all things, without, however, admitting that he loves all things. (As a result, they were hesitant even to attribute the quality of love to God.) Such a position required a precarious balancing act. To say that God wills all things but still loves piety and hates impiety, this group had to posit that non-existent things were also objects of God's love and hatred. God does will piety, but for the pious, and he does will impiety, but for the impious: This, in turn, means that he hates impiety, but only for the pious, and that he hates piety, but only for the impious. Such things (the impiety of the pious and the piety of the impious) do not actually exist. However, by arguing in this way, the partisans of this kind of thinking were able to claim that God wills all things while still loving piety (for the pious, which does exist, and for the impious, which does not exist) and hating impiety (for the pious, which does not exist, and for the impious, which does exist).

Ibn Taymiyya had problems with both viewpoints but reserved most of his criticism for the second. He parted ways with the first position by emphasizing, in affirmation of scripture, that all things are the result of God's will (while still managing to affirm human freewill), but he found the second position untenable. Not only did it result in a bundle of theological concoctions, as just noted, but more profoundly, its unduly static understanding of God's will neglects verses that speak of it as wisdom. For Ibn Taymiyya, God does will all things, but he does not do so foolishly. He does not will what he hates for some and what he loves for others.

Ibn Taymiyya took another tact, thinking of God's will in a twofold manner: God does not will all things in the same way. He does not will good and evil arbitrarily. God wills good things, such as piety, as ends or goods in themselves. He wills evil things, such as impiety, but not as ends or goods in themselves. Rather, they are willed as a means to something else that is pleasing to God. For example, some are willed to be sinners not because sinfulness is pleasing to God but for others to be saved through their negative example. There is wisdom to God's will.

Ibn Taymiyya does not resolve all questions with his division of things into two categories: what pleases God for itself (such as piety), and what pleases him not for itself but because of what it produces (such as impiety that causes others to repent). But it does allow him to say that all religious practices do not equally reflect the will of God. If they did all equally reflect the will of God, one might conclude that they are all equally pleasing to him. This would be a way to justify deviant religious practices in the name of God. This is his ultimate concern, and he attributes this type of fatalistic thinking to Ash'arism: If all things are from God, then correct and incorrect forms of worship are equally valid. For Ibn Taymiyya, it is the height of misguidance to say that since God has created all things, good and evil, he has willed all things equally for a single purpose. That would be absurd, making good and evil alike in the eyes of God. In other words, it would be to suggest that God willed things without the wisdom that the Qur'an attributes to him. This, in

turn, would suggest that God is less than perfect, failing to undertake things with wise purposes. One would have to say that all things, good and evil, are equally part of God's will, making it possible to say that religious practices based on human conjecture are no less a reflection of God's will than those that reflect the plain sense of scripture.

It is around the question of corrupt forms of worship that Ibn Taymiyya's ideas on love flow into polemics. In a treatise on love,⁴¹ as in his explicitly polemical writings, he attributes deviant beliefs in Islam not only to scholarly conjecture but also to the negative model of Christians. For Ibn Taymiyya, love is essentially a motive. We love and thus pursue what gives us pleasure. God also loves what is pleasing to him, taking joy, for example, in a sinner who repents (although divine love for Ibn Taymiyya is not comparable to human love despite the shared language). Humans, of course, are motivated by pleasures. There are pleasures in this world and also in the next that motivate them to do things to realize those pleasures. However, some scholars—Ibn Taymiyya names Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī—have confused the matter.⁴² On the basis of conjecture, they understand pleasure in metaphysical (that is, non-bodily) terms, denying the physical descriptions of pleasure that according to the Qur'an the inhabitants of paradise will enjoy and also the physical descriptions of pain that the inhabitants of hell will suffer.

Such a view, Ibn Taymiyya claims, brings about the corruption of religion: corrupt beliefs and corrupt practices, including deviant forms of worship and ascetical practices. In short, it is a denial of the truth of God's promise and threat, that is, his promise of pleasure in paradise and his threat of pain in hell as communicated by his prophetic messengers. As a result, those who hold this view abandon pleasures in this world that are of benefit to them and also turn away from the pleasures in the next world for which they have been created. They misguidedly replace these pleasures with what poses harm to them. All this is the result of philosophical conjecture on the meaning of pleasure! Here, Ibn Taymiyya quotes Q 53:23, "They only follow *ẓann* and the whims of their souls even when guidance has come to them from their Lord." As a result, Muslims go astray, pursuing pleasures they mistakenly think will bring them benefit without knowledge of the end for which love exists or the path by which to reach it. Most become absorbed in pleasures that only harm the body and soul. In this respect, Ibn Taymiyya remarks, they are like Christians, denying the promised physical pleasures of paradise and concocting forms of worship with no scriptural basis. By imitating Christians, Muslims go astray, as the Qur'an warns at Q 5:77, "Do not follow the whims of a people that went astray before. They have led many astray, and they have strayed from the straight way." Led by scholarly conjecture, Muslims now find themselves in a similar situation, confused about true pleasure. Thinking, like Christians, that true pleasure is ultimately spiritual, they succumb to the lusts of sinfulness in this world, permitting themselves food and drink that God has forbidden, just as the Christians have done. For Ibn Taymiyya, all of this is the result of scholarly rationalizations.

Thus, even in his writings on love, Ibn Taymiyya deploys the skeptical language of the Qur'an to accuse his scholarly adversaries of inventing beliefs and practices, associating them with the ignorance that had led Christians into theological error. At another place in the same work, Ibn Taymiyya comments on Q 7:28, "If they commit immorality, they say, 'We found our fathers doing it. So Allah has commanded us to do it.' Allah does not command immorality, or do you say things about Allah of which you have no knowledge?" Commenting on the verse, Ibn Taymiyya says that by imitating their forefathers, such people only follow *ẓann*.⁴³ He then applies the verse to Muslims: devotees of Sufism, scholars of philosophy and theology, and military commanders and soldiers, who fabricate lies in the name of religion to justify the immoralities they commit against the prohibitions of scripture.

For Ibn Taymiyya, at the bottom of it all is a perverse form of love, namely, passion (*ishq*), which, he claims, Muslims have turned into religion. By his day, scholars had constructed a theory of love to justify divine-human attraction. This was to make a human passion (love) a means for drawing close to God. As a result, Muslims go crazy over beautiful figures, thinking them to be manifestations of God's beauty and thus a means to incite the heart in worship of God. They even go so far as to consider that their Lord dwells in such figures or is united with them. They then go on to commit immoralities with these figures. (Ibn Taymiyya is insinuating sexual relations with prepubescent males.) But they justify it in the name of religion, claiming that Muslims before them did it. For Ibn Taymiyya, this is the height of polytheism whereby Muslims now resemble Christians. You can find them, he claims, setting up rivals to God, loving them as they love God, either out of genuine but misguided devotion or from lust—or both. This is the sad situation of the umma even when scripture makes it clear that Muslims should have no love for anything like their love for God and his messenger. Such thinking leads to religiously decadent behavior. Muslims now take pleasure in listening to poetry and song that stir up a base form of love common to all people. It may be the mark of those who love God, but it is also the mark of those who love idols, crosses, their own spiritual brethren, nations, prepubescent boys, and women along with God. How can Muslims pursue this kind of polytheism-inducing love while claiming to be monotheists? It begins with human conjecture and culminates in the grossest of theological errors.

Ibn Taymiyya wrote on a wide variety of topics across his voluminous writings. He offered novel views on long-standing conundrums in Islam. For example, as seen in earlier chapters, Muslims had long debated the question of the origin of the world. Had God created it in time or was it coeternal with him? If it was created in time, this suggests that God's will was susceptible to change, a notion seen to impinge upon his perfection. Before he created the world, he did not will it. Then, upon creating it, he willed it. This means that his will had changed. How could a fickle deity be perfect? For this reason, Islam's scholars were ready to accept the eternity of the world even if it meant contradicting the Qur'an. Ibn Taymiyya offered a

more dynamic perspective: One of God's attributes is that of creator. As all divine attributes, that of creator characterizes God from eternity. Since God is eternal, everything about him is eternal. It is thus not possible that there might have been a time when God, who is characterized as creator, was not creator. This means that as creator he creates from eternity, even before he created the world in time. In other words, he did create the world in time, but only within a spectrum of perpetual creativity with no beginning and no end.⁴⁴ Ibn Taymiyya offered a similar solution for divine speech, the Qur'an. Is it created or eternal? The question has constituted the greatest theological controversy in Islam. Ibn Taymiyya argued that it was the best of God's speech yet still only one point on a continuum of divine speech with no origin and no end. The Qur'an, as divine speech, is therefore uncreated but not necessarily eternal!

The bigger picture

Ibn Taymiyya was not simply interested in convincing his scholarly peers of their theological errors when it came to God's attributes, the stature of the Qur'an, and so on. His writings take shape out of his ultimate concern to preserve and promote sound monotheistic worship. He shows little interest in broader questions of culture and science. This makes his theological outlook decidedly different from that of Jahiz. Jahiz featured in chapter one as a scholar deeply interested in sound monotheism but also willing to look to the wisdom of other cultures as a partner in the divine mission of Islam. His diverse writings venture beyond the bounds of theology, strictly speaking, into the spheres of literature and biology, and virtually all fields of knowledge, whereas Ibn Taymiyya was wholly preoccupied with the task of walling off religion from the effects of culture. He did affirm that human nature, at least in pristine form, is disposed to know and love God even without prophetic revelation, and his theological vision is a call for intellectual liberation from the static thinking of philosophy, but his cultural outlook is rather narrow.

Jahiz, too, as we saw, had trouble with forms of worship that smacked of polytheism, and he, too, it will be recalled, wrote against Christianity, associating it with other Muslims, namely, the anthropomorphist partisans of Ibn Hanbal. However, in contrast to Ibn Taymiyya, Jahiz is bolder in his thinking and more optimistic about what the mind can know. Ibn Taymiyya might have been optimistic about divine mercy, something he saw as necessary for God, not because one might reach such a conclusion through philosophical argumentation but because the Qur'an says that God prescribed mercy for himself (Q 6:12). It is for this reason that he sees God acting with wisdom, purposefully for the sake of his creatures, not arbitrarily assigning good and evil without rhyme or reason. However, Ibn Taymiyya had a decidedly negative opinion about the human condition in general. In his view, it was theologically debased and could only be corrected by the religion of God. Humans were not wholly depraved, but they did need religion—scriptural

religion not conjectural religion—to restore their nature to the state God had destined for it. There was little point in looking to other cultures for wisdom.

Muslims, like Christians, had now veered away from their divinely mandated destiny. They had introduced all sorts of humanly devised practices into the religion of God that had been revealed in order to save them from theological error. Like Christians, Muslims had taken to kissing the gravesites of saints when only the black stone at the Ka'ba in Mecca is to be kissed. By taking saints no less than prophets as intercessory powers, they had fallen into a theological error close to polytheism, and they had even greatly exaggerated the meaning of prophetic intercession. Seeking the Prophet's intercession is permitted in Islam, but its validity depends on the manner in which it is practiced. For Ibn Taymiyya, Muslims had fallen into error by seeking the Prophet's intercession not on the basis of his invocations on their behalf. They misguidedly thought that he interceded for them because of a quasi-divine essence he possessed. One is to seek a means to God, Ibn Taymiyya notes, not by turning the Prophet into a quasi-divine intermediary who will bring you to God but rather by believing that the Prophet is the messenger of God and obeying him—and hoping for his prayers on one's behalf. Muslims had gone even further in error. Not only had they elevated the Prophet to quasi-divine stature, but they had done this also with the saints, concocting a spiritual hierarchy with no basis in scripture.

Ibn Taymiyya was not opposed to the idea of sainthood. The Qur'an refers to "the friends of God." But he is opposed to the superstitions that had demeaned the institution of sainthood. People are not holy because of claims that God has appeared in them or become united with them. According to Ibn Taymiyya, such belief results from the influence of Christian thinking. Rather, people are holy because they live piously in conformity with the precedents established by the Prophet and the righteous predecessors. In this sense, Ibn Taymiyya is not quite arguing for a more egalitarian view of sainthood, now open to all who strictly follow Islam's way of life as he defines it, but a more egalitarian view of sainthood may feature in his thinking as an unintended consequence. His more immediate purpose is to undermine what he saw as the quasi-polytheism of Sufism that turned Muslims into deviant monotheists, like Christians. This put in jeopardy the divine mandate that had been entrusted to them by the call of Muhammad to make all religion God's.

Sufism in Islam is hardly a singular phenomenon. Ibn Taymiyya was not opposed to it as a discipline of the soul that worked to strip believers of traces of hypocrisy. Through ascetical and spiritual exercises, Muslims could free themselves of worldly attachments that led them to undertake their religious duties for the sake of communal approval rather than for the sake of God. However, Ibn Taymiyya stridently condemns beliefs and practices that in his view depart from the religion of God, especially philosophical forms of Sufism associated with the monistic thinking of Ibn 'Arabi. According to Ibn Taymiyya, such thinking inevitably grows out of conjecturing about God's will. As discussed above, such conjecture leads to the idea that all is equally

the will of God, including idolatrous practices. Ibn Taymiyya actually shared something of Ibn 'Arabi's outlook on scripture. They both accepted the anthropomorphist qualities that the Qur'an ascribes to God. However, in contrast to Ibn 'Arabi, Ibn Taymiyya rejected the idea that man might resemble God in any way.⁴⁵ The creature can in no way be like the creator.

Sainthood in Islam, of course, is not a primitive form of piety that considers holy men and women to be quasi-divine. It actually rests on a communal as opposed to individual understanding of divine favor. Muslims do not return to God as individuals but as a community, the *umma* of Muhammad. Islam does call for individual efforts. By doing good works, both moral and ritual, you accumulate merits in anticipation of Judgment Day. However, in Sufism, which is a basic part of the overall schema of Islam, there is also a sense that believers help one another on the path to God. Those who have travelled further on the spiritual path are in a better position to help the less spiritually advanced. Sufism can have bizarre practices and has sometimes been abused for material gain, but one can question Ibn Taymiyya's characterization of it as a breach in the monotheism of Islam.

Still, Ibn Taymiyya is not without grounds in claiming that some of the practices of Sufism cannot be traced to the righteous predecessors. His attack on the allegedly excessive practices of Sufism reflects his restriction of monotheism to the religion of the righteous predecessors. Thus, in his view, practices that were not known in their day constitute a breach in the monotheism of Islam. However, the practitioners of Sufism that he condemned did not see things this way. The deeper issue is the nature of religion. Is it limited only to things with a scriptural basis? Or does religion, even if grounded in a message from God, progress across time, reflecting a community and its ever-developing tradition as much as a distantly sacred past? This is not to say that Ibn Taymiyya was thinking of theories of religion in his attacks on Sufism. His concern was that the religious elite of Islam, like the leaders of Jews and Christians before them, had turned themselves into lords over the masses of unwitting Muslims, reversing the very purpose of God's religion!

Correcting Christians—and Christian-like Muslims

It is in view of the foregoing that one should read Ibn Taymiyya's polemics against Christians. He had a relatively good knowledge of Christianity even if he had little sympathy for it. When he does write against Christians, he really means what he says. In his view, they are unintelligent and therefore unable to understand the message of their own scripture. As a result, they come up with outlandish doctrines about three gods, one of whom was killed on a cross, and confuse divinity with humanity by making Jesus the Son of God. The problem lies not in the wordings of their scripture. Rather, Christian leaders read into their scripture what they want it to say in order to rationalize their dominion over the faithful. Christians accept this because they have come to believe that their leaders are above fault. They follow their every word as if

they, like prophets, are protected from error. For this reason, Christians no longer know the truth of their own religion. No Christian, Ibn Taymiyya states in the epigraph of this chapter, is not religiously ignorant. They might be diligent in their devotions, but they unquestioningly accept the words of their leaders and so end up worshipping something other than God.⁴⁶

All of this reflects Ibn Taymiyya's deep anxieties about the state of the umma. Muslims, too, have come to think of their leaders as if they are prophets. This leads them to follow their every word whether or not it is consistent with the scriptures the prophets conveyed. The upshot is that the fallible words of Islam's religious scholars and spiritual masters enjoy the same stature as the infallible words of prophecy. Muslims, even if outwardly different from Christians in their beliefs and practices, have now become exactly like them, following not divine revelation but human conjecture. The problem goes back to the philosophizing tendencies of Islam's scholars. Instead of simply accepting the fact that God chooses prophets as he wishes and supports them with miracles, they prefer to understand prophecy on human terms. Indeed, as discussed in the last chapter, Ghazali largely accepted Avicenna's conception of prophecy as a state of the human soul. For Ibn Taymiyya, this has caused great confusion in the umma. As the Christians did with their leaders, Muslims now think that their spiritual masters possess souls that are like those of the prophets, rendering them, like prophets, above error. This, for Ibn Taymiyya, is the beginning of the end. Once you make humans infallible, you end up ignorant of the origin of religion, following the words of leaders rather than of God.

It is, then, Ibn Taymiyya's anxieties over the state of the umma that shape his writings on Christianity. By denouncing the beliefs of Christians, he is also implying that Muslims who resemble Christians in any way are also to be denounced as faux monotheists. Thus, while not ignorant of the beliefs of Christians, Ibn Taymiyya's writings on Christianity are not the result of any positive engagement with Christians. The direct contact he had with Christians was entirely negative. The goal was to ensure the demise of their faith, not to understand it on its own terms. Since his ultimate purpose in writing against Christians was to denounce what he saw as deviant beliefs among Muslims, there is no reason here to consider his analysis of Christianity. Our goal is, rather, to consider the language he uses against them and the way it reflects his own skeptical strategies against his Muslim adversaries. They, too, have come to follow a religion based on human conjecture rather than scriptural precedent. The real culprit is overly philosophical argumentation that justifies a religious system in which believers take their leaders as prophets.

Ibn Taymiyya makes degrading remarks about Christians in nearly every one of his works. This alone suggests that his purpose in speaking of Christians is only to associate their beliefs with the deviant ones he sees among fellow Muslims. He devoted a work to refuting the beliefs of Christians, *The Correct Response to the Changers of the Religion of Christ*.⁴⁷ Even there, his main goal is not analysis of Christianity. He strongly criticizes

the beliefs of Christians, and he is convinced of their erroneous ways, but the language he uses against them echoes his attacks against his Muslim adversaries. They, like Christians, rather than applying pure reason to scripture, use philosophy to justify their conjecturing about God.

The ostensible reason for writing the work was a letter by a Christian from Cyprus. This letter, whose author is unknown, was a reworking of a treatise, written about a century earlier, in which the claim was advanced that the message of Islam, while sound in some respects, is only addressed to the polytheists of seventh-century Arabia.⁴⁸ In other words, it does not apply to Christians. Its message is therefore not universal. The anonymous letter from Cyprus goes on to argue that the Qur'an actually supports the truths of Christianity. Ibn Taymiyya, responding to these and other claims, "resists close discussion of the arguments raised in the letter from Cyprus, sensing that these are traps that would only land him in a muddle."⁴⁹ It is not simply caution that keeps him from careful analysis of the letter's import. It is not his purpose to undertake such analysis. The letter offers him yet another opportunity to discredit the deviant beliefs of Muslims by associating them with Christian beliefs, attacking the one with the same charge he makes against the other.

In the introduction to the refutation, he asserts that the religion of God is one. There may be other religious ways of life, but Islam is the best.⁵⁰ Moreover, among the beliefs of Muslims, those of the righteous predecessors are best. However, he continues, religious degeneracy has become widespread. The Jews, he claims, are not the source of the problem. They are bad people who oppose the directives of their own scripture, but they are still monotheists. This contrasts with Christians, whom he calls polytheists.⁵¹ In his eyes, the very existence of Christians is problematic. What for them is religion is for Islam a scandal. Recounting the origins of Islam, he alludes to Christianity, which he brands as worship of crosses, as something that needs to be suppressed along with idolatry and fire worship:

Allah sent Muhammad at a time when the series of prophetic messengers had been suspended; infidelity had appeared; and the paths of Allah had been effaced. With Muhammad, Allah revived the marks of faith that had disappeared and suppressed the people of polytheism: worshippers of idols, fires, and crosses. Through Muhammad, Allah brought low the infidels among the People of the Book [Jews and Christians], who are the people who cause doubt [*shakk*] and uncertainty [*irtiyāb*] within the religion of Allah.⁵²

Ibn Taymiyya is undoubtedly attacking the theological deficiencies he ascribes to Christians, but he is also attacking deviant beliefs among Muslims. Christians offer a vicarious means for him to attack groups of Muslims who in his view have turned creatures into divine lords.⁵³ To this end, he quotes a hadith predicting that Muslims would follow the customs of other peoples: Jews and Christians, Romans and Persians. Muslims, the hadith says, would

become so enamored of the ways of other peoples that they would even follow them into a lizard's lair.⁵⁴ This makes Muslims hypocrites, outwardly manifesting belief in all that the messenger brought but actually believing in the opposite. For this, they are destined for the lowest recess in hell, even below that of Jews and Christians.⁵⁵

Ibn Taymiyya follows a particular method in attacking the beliefs of Christians. He proceeds not by attacking their beliefs per se but by criticizing the rationalizing way in which they read their own scripture. It is not a reading of scripture based on pure reason apart from scholastic machinations. Ibn Taymiyya therefore offers his own interpretation of biblical passages that Christians mistakenly take as the basis of their deviant beliefs. Ibn Taymiyya may think that he is helping Christians to understand the message of their own scripture, but he is actually undertaking a Muslim reading of it. We saw in chapter one how Theodore Abu Qurra offered a Christian reading of the Qur'an at the court of al-Ma'mun. Here, Ibn Taymiyya presents a Muslim reading of the Bible. Christians in his view fail to read their own scripture correctly. The problem lies in the flawed logic they apply to the Bible. In short, they philosophize, failing to read scripture according to its plain meanings. It is this rationalizing that makes them faux monotheists. This, of course, is the exact claim that Ibn Taymiyya makes against deviant Muslims. It is on the basis of faulty logic that they stray from monotheism and come to view leaders as lords. In this, they are like Christians. At one point in his refutation of Christians, Ibn Taymiyya claims that Christians rationalize their belief in tri-theism by aligning it with philosophical categories.⁵⁶ In other words, they are saying that the wordings of scripture do not mean what they say. The New Testament speaks of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but it really refers to God in his essence, his speech, and his life. In short, they rationalize their conjectures about scripture (*takallafū li-mā ḡannūhu madlūl al-kitāb ṭarīqan 'aqliyya*); they then interpret their scripture in a way that they conjecture to be rationally permissible (*tafsīrīran ḡannūhu jā'izan fī l-'aql*); and then they conclude, on the basis of their conjecture (*li-ḡannihim*), that their rationalizations are exactly what scripture communicates. Because they hold that the wording of scripture—such as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—cannot be accepted in their plain sense, they are compelled to philosophize to justify what they think such wordings should mean. As a result, they end up worshipping a concoction made up by their own minds. In this, Ibn Taymiyya notes, they are like the polytheists mentioned in the Qur'an who thought that God had a son (*walad*) as his associate (*sharīk*).

Here, Ibn Taymiyya goes on to speak of “the people of innovations and error,” by which he means deviant Muslims. Why is he speaking of Muslims in a refutation of Christians? His goal is to show that the rationalizing process that led to Christian deviancy is the same as the one that led to Muslim deviancy. Deviant Muslims, too, base their quasi-polytheistic reverence of their spiritual masters on philosophical rationalizations. For example, they turn the monotheistic message of the Qur'an into a theory of monism in

which all existence potentially reflects divine existence. They then claim that their spiritual masters, given their righteousness, are perfect reflections of divine existence on earth, accepting their teachings unquestioningly (*taqlīd*), even when they depart from the teachings of Muhammad in the *sharī'a*.

Whether Muslims or Christians, when it comes to corrupt forms of belief, the problem lies with flawed logic. This is the heart of Ibn Taymiyya's skepticism, his doubt in the power of logic if not corrected by the logic of God in scripture. Applying philosophical logic to scripture only leads one to abandon its plain meanings for conjecture about God. It is, then, ultimately the logic of philosophy as applied to scripture that has caused Muslims and Christians alike to turn from the religion of God in its plain meanings as communicated by scripture. As a result, Christians have a skewed reading of the Bible, which results in beliefs—such as tri-theism—with no basis in the books of Allah, neither in the Gospel nor in any other books. To be sure, the Bible speaks of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but if one were to read these wordings in their plain meanings instead of the philosophical categories of essence, speech, and life, one would see that they do not speak of three separate gods no more than they make Jesus divine. Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya maintains, if one reads the texts of the prophets with pure reason (that is, apart from philosophizing and mysticizing tendencies), one will see that scripture offers evidence of the opposite, namely, of monotheism (not tri-theism) and of the humanity (not divinity) of Christ.⁵⁷ In other words, Ibn Taymiyya is suggesting that if Christians were to read the Bible without philosophizing and mysticizing about its wordings, they would have the beliefs of Islam. The problem lies not in their books but in their minds.

All of this reflects Ibn Taymiyya's polemics against deviant beliefs in Islam. Christians are but a convenient target—one could say collateral damage—in a larger battle with fellow Muslims. In the introductory remarks to his refutation of Christians, he spells out the overall pattern of his thinking.⁵⁸ It runs as follows: Deviant beliefs have emerged among Muslims due to the failure to adhere to revealed knowledge. This has led them to take up religious innovations that their own scholarly leaders have fabricated, making them opponents of the prophets because they refuse to accept the plain meanings of scripture. Muslims are thus guilty of the very charge the Qur'an levels against Jews and Christians, namely, turning their leaders into divine lords (Q 9:31). This does not happen accidentally but results when scholars consciously replace divine speech with human conjecture.

The following passage underscores the fact that by conjecture, Ibn Taymiyya means thinking that is at odds with pure reason and sound revelation. This, of course, recalls the title of his work against the Greco-Hellenistic brand of logic that in his view had so damaged the *umma*, and had led to deviant beliefs, including the quasi-polytheist hypotheses of Sufism as epitomized in the writings of Ibn 'Arabi:

All of this is in opposition [*mukhālafa*] to pure intellect [*ṣarīḥ al-ma'qūl*] and sound revelation [*saḥīḥ al-manqūl*] as a result of what they conjecture

[*ẓann*] about divine revelations and mystical disclosures received in Syria [*al-futūḥāt al-quḍsiyya*, a reference to the magnum opus of Ibn ‘Arabi]. In point of fact, it is merely the whispering of the accursed one [that is, Satan].⁵⁹

The fact that Ibn Taymiyya’s refutation of Christians is but a proxy battle in a larger war can be seen in his application of “divine indwelling” and “divine union” to both Christian beliefs in Jesus and Muslim beliefs in saints. The point is not that Christian reverence of Jesus is the same as deviant attitudes of Muslims toward saintly figures. Rather, by applying to Christian beliefs the quasi-divinizing language that Muslims use to describe their spiritual masters, Ibn Taymiyya accuses them of being like Christians. In fact, such Muslims are worse than Christians. Christians, he says, reserve such language only for Jesus whereas Muslims apply it indiscriminately to countless saints.⁶⁰ For Muslims, as for Christians, the problem lies in the way scholars manipulate the meanings of ambiguous passages in the Qur’an. Claiming that such passages do not stand up to logic, philosophizing scholars apply their law of interpretation to them. The result is mere conjecture:

The problem is what people see as ambiguous expressions [*alfāẓ muta-shābiḥa*]. As a result, they adhere to what they think these expressions mean on the basis of conjecture [*ẓann*], and so they turn away from the clear, pure, sure expressions [*al-alfāẓ al-muḥkama al-ṣarīḥa al-mubīna*] as a result of their whims. [He then quotes Q 53:23.] “They only follow *ẓann* and the personal whims of their souls even when guidance has come to them from their Lord.”⁶¹

Ibn Taymiyya retorts that the righteous predecessors knew nothing of conjecture and personal whims.⁶² Now, however, Muslims have chosen to focus on a handful of ambiguous verses while neglecting the many clear ones. Applying philosophizing and mysticizing logic to these verses, they come up with quasi-polytheist beliefs similar to those of Christians. Indeed, they use the very approach to the Qur’an that the author of the letter from Cyprus used to refute Islam. He, too, concentrated on ambiguous passages in the Qur’an, interpreting them in ways that fit his rationalizations. In other words, Muslims who make use of such passages to support their own rationalizations actually refute their own religion! Just as the anonymous author of the letter from Cyprus focused on ambiguous verses in the Qur’an, and used faulty logic to claim that they supported Christianity, so, too, do Muslims make the same mistake only to end by justifying deviant forms of belief:

It is like the situation of Muslims who concoct innovations and follow whims. They focus on the ambiguous [*mutashābih*] and doubtful [*mashkūk*] parts of prophetic scripture, leaving aside the sure pure parts. They focus on the bit that is ambiguous according to syllogisms and

theological speculations. It is like the situation of the infidels [that is, Christians] and all people of innovations and whims who liken the creature to the creator and the creator to the creature. The false religion of the Christians is innovated religion. They innovated it after Christ, upon him peace, exchanging the religion of Christ for it. They went astray, turning from the law of Christ to their innovations.⁶³

The author of the letter from Cyprus makes arguments on the basis of scriptural verses, but his knowledge of their meanings is mistaken. As a result, he leaves aside many clear texts from the Qur'an, which he says was sent only for Arab polytheists at the time of Muhammad, but these are the texts that make it clear that it was sent to Christians. Christians do the same things with texts from the Torah, Gospel, and Psalms. [They conjecture about their meanings without knowledge.] They abandon the many clear texts of scripture, focusing on the few ambiguous verses, the meanings of which they do not understand.⁶⁴

At one point in his refutation of Christians, Ibn Taymiyya states three reasons why both Christians and Christian-like Muslims have gone astray.⁶⁵ All three result in beliefs based on conjecture rather than knowledge. Firstly, Christians and Christian-like Muslims both focus on ambiguous verses, interpreting them in a way to fit their own school of thought while ignoring the many more verses the meanings of which are plain. Secondly, they think that the actions of their leaders apparently at odds with the laws of nature are miracles when in point of fact they are the work of demons. Thirdly, they accept traditions that are false, thinking them to be true as a result of their conjectures.

Ibn Taymiyya makes much of the second issue, miracles, in his rhetoric against Christians and Christian-like Muslims. Prophets, of course, are capable of miracles, and they also accurately speak of past and present things of which no one but a prophet could know. Other people, Ibn Taymiyya admits, are also capable of actions that defy nature, but such actions do not belong to the same class as the miracles of prophets. Moreover, even if such actions are the result of divine permission rather than demonic inspiration, they cannot be used to rationalize a claim for the infallibility of contemporary religious leaders and spiritual masters. Only prophets are protected from error in conveying revelation. Only their instructions should be followed as guidance from God. All other religious figures are not infallible. Despite their miracle-like activity, what they teach beyond scripture should not be confused with the divine instruction that prophets bring.

Muslims, then, should not be like Christians who use philosophy to make specious claims for the teachings of their leaders. Here, Ibn Taymiyya is thinking of the partisans of Sufism and Shi'ism.⁶⁶ One should be careful in general about reports of miracles. A report could be true, and it could be false. One has to verify it. If it is true, it could be the work of the allies of Satan, such as magicians and priests. However, even if it is the result of a spiritual state that sometimes characterizes the friends of God (that is, the

saints of Sufism), it does not oblige one to obey without question all that the saint teaches, as if he were a prophet. Those who think the performance of miracles requires blind obedience to the words of the spiritual masters who perform them have conflated sainthood with prophethood. Only prophets are infallible. Basing their claims on philosophical rationalizations, Muslims have come to think, like Christians, that God chooses certain individuals as sites for his indwelling (*hulūl*). As a result, some Muslims, he says, are actually more like Christians than they are Muslims.

Christians, then, use conjecture to argue for the “indwelling” of God in Jesus. There is no rational basis for such a belief, and so they concoct a pseudo-scriptural basis for it in the teachings of the apostles of Jesus, who were not prophets but followers of prophets. Miracles might have occurred at their hands, but this, Ibn Taymiyya insists, does not make their teachings free of error, as he argued in the case of the saintly figures of Islam. In point of fact, it was Satan, not Jesus, who appeared to the apostles after his death. (The Qur’an denies that Jesus died.) Here was the beginning of their conjecturing. Deceived by Satan, they had to concoct a reason to make sense of what they witnessed, thinking Jesus died and rose from death. This is why Christians cling to the writings of the apostles rather than the scriptures of the prophets. It is the only way they can justify their irrational beliefs. This, in turn, leads them to rationalize, using philosophical conjecture to explain beliefs that have no rational basis. Ibn Taymiyya makes this very point at the start of his voluminous treatise against syllogistic reasoning. Muslims whose beliefs are based on such rationalizing are like Christians; both follow conjecture in religious matters.⁶⁷ What agrees with their rule of interpretation, Islam’s scholars accept, and what does not, they reject. However, even if Muslims are now guilty of the same rationalizing that led Christians to justify quasi-polytheistic beliefs, the difference is that Islam’s scholars are aware that they are departing from the plain meanings of the texts of revelation whereas Christians, when they make their conjectures, think that they are actually following the plain meanings of their scriptures.

Ibn Taymiyya’s concern over beliefs about miracles comes out in *The Book of Prophecies*.⁶⁸ There, too, he drags Christians into Muslim controversy. How to tell a miracle from a non-miracle (such as a magical trick)? The issue is of utmost importance because a miracle, if authentic, attests to the authenticity of a person’s claim to be a prophet. According to Ibn Taymiyya, the issue flowed into the controversy over sainthood. The line between saints and prophets had become blurred. If care were not taken to preserve the distinction, a saint who performed a miracle could be considered a prophet of sorts. For Ibn Taymiyya, this would be the end of scriptural religion. People would take the statements of their saintly leaders to be true religion. Muslims do recognize the miracles of saints, as God’s way of honoring them, but it does not give their teachings the status of prophecy.

Ibn Taymiyya begins the work by noting the confusion over miracles performed by prophets and those performed by others. Are they all miracles?

How does one define a miracle? There are two points of view. One group, Ibn Taymiyya reports, says that anything that departs from the customary order of things is a miracle, but such miracles would only happen for a prophet. This, however, is to deny the widely attested reports of extraordinary phenomena that occurred at the hands of magicians, priests, and righteous saints. Ibn Taymiyya agrees that a miracle is only a miracle when accompanied by a claim to prophecy. In his view, a miracle attests to the authenticity of a prophet, but he accepts the fact that extraordinary phenomena occur at the hands of non-prophets. This makes it vital to distinguish miracles from extraordinary phenomena. If not, non-prophets at whose hands extraordinary phenomena take place could claim that their words are revelation from God. They could claim that such phenomena occurring at their hands are actually miracles, giving them a foundation on which to claim prophetic stature.

Another group, whose view on miracles is highly problematic for Ibn Taymiyya, maintains that there is no limit to the way the customary order of things can be suspended. This is to imply that what is true for prophets is true for non-prophets when it comes to acts that defy the customary order of the world. This applies not only to righteous saints but also to magicians and priests. The only difference is that in the case of prophets, miracles coincide with a claim to prophecy. Moreover, the miracles of prophets cannot be countered (that is, blocked by some intervening force). A liar who claimed to be a prophet would eventually be exposed for his lack of honesty. However, for Ibn Taymiyya, this does not preserve the dividing line between prophets and non-prophets. A person at whose hands a miracle is preserved is assumed to be honest until another miracle is performed to counter the first one. Without the counter miracle, people have no criteria to distinguish the prophet from the charlatan. This offers a rationale to conflate prophetic and non-prophetic religion, making it seem that God is indifferent to true religion, permitting miracles to take place in the case of prophets and non-prophets alike without providing a way to distinguish between the two. Is God indifferent to the purposes for which things happen? In the case of Muhammad, he allowed the moon to be split and revealed a book to him the likes of which no poet, however skilled, could compose even a single verse. Also in the case of Muhammad, elephants refused to storm Mecca when commanded to do so in honor of his birth, and the sky filled with meteors to keep heavenly demons from intercepting the message of God to Muhammad as it was revealed. Was God indifferent in allowing all this to happen?

For Ibn Taymiyya, the second group is the more pernicious. Even if seemingly harmless, these Muslims are inclined to say that all things happen by God's arbitrary will. God bestows miracles on prophets and non-prophets alike. This is to equate all forms of piety in God's eyes, implying that God acts in arbitrary fashion, not with wisdom. The logical conclusion that this group is forced to make is that prophets and magicians are the same in the eyes of God since he bestows miracles on both. It is in this way that Muslims are able to justify their devotion to saints. They are like Christians, Ibn

Taymiyya says, for equating the powers of saints with those of prophets. This, in turn, requires them to obey their spiritual masters as if they were messengers sent by God. The lynchpin, of course, is the scholarly reliance on the logic of philosophy. Instead of recognizing that prophecy is a divine initiative attested to by miracles, Muslims, under the influence of Avicenna, conjecture that prophecy is a state of the soul. It is the clever philosophers who concocted the idea that a righteous soul is the mark of a prophet. But saints have righteous souls, too, further blurring the distinction between prophethood and sainthood. The magician may have a bad soul, but Ibn Taymiyya is more concerned to preserve the distinction between saints and prophets. The problem is that Muslims have come to view saints and prophets on the same terms. Both are righteous, and miracles occur at the hands of both. It is this that leads to quasi-polytheistic beliefs. By philosophizing, Muslims come to see sainthood as a source of religion no less than prophethood, requiring them to view their spiritual masters as sources of infallible instruction regarding the religion of God. This makes them Christian-like:

Here is where many people went astray, Christians and others. The apostles of Christ had honorific miracles [*karāmāt*] as do the righteous ones of the umma. They then *conjectured* that that makes it necessary to regard them as infallible like the prophets. They made it obligatory to agree with all that they say. This is a sophistic error [*ghalaṭ*]. It is obligatory to accept all that the Prophet says on account of his being a prophet who claims prophecy with miracles attesting to his honesty. The Prophet is infallible, but here the miracle attests not to prophecy but to *following* the Prophet and the soundness of the religion of the Prophet, but this does not necessitate seeing this follower [that is, the saint] as infallible. The saint is only a saint if he believes in the prophetic messenger. However, the words of Abū Ḥāmid [that is, Ghazali, who, it will be remembered, accepted Avicenna's idea of prophecy as a state of the human soul] benefit the philosophizers. This makes the Islam of the philosophers secure, but the faith of the believer becomes like that of the philosophers.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Ibn Taymiyya was a skeptic insofar as he cast doubt upon the dogmatic assumptions of his day, especially regarding the stature of religious leaders. This was not a call for the liberation of individual conscience from the dominion of the umma's leaders. It was, rather, a call for true religion to be liberated from the false religion of dogmatic assertions that had no basis in scripture. This required him, as skeptics of the past, to attack the logic on the basis of which such assertions were justified. The polemics of Ibn Taymiyya against the truth claims of his day were connected to the political circumstances of the age.

Ibn Taymiyya hoped for liberation of the umma from Mongol dominion. In his view, the only way to do this was by the umma cleaning up its own religious house, restoring the true religion they had abandoned in favor of the conjectures of their leaders, conjectures based not on scripture but on the use of philosophical logic to justify non-revealed beliefs.

How could it be demonstrated that Muslims had got it all wrong? Ibn Taymiyya found the answer in Christians. What Muslim could deny the charges of faux monotheism that the Qur'an leveled against Christians? To restore religion, it was not enough for Ibn Taymiyya to announce to Muslims that they had strayed from the teachings of the righteous predecessors. He had to shock them by announcing that they had effectively become Christians. In this way, he redeployed the skeptical strategy of the Qur'an, applying its rhetoric of suspicion against fellow Muslims. In the time of Ibn Taymiyya as in the time of Jahiz, Christians would become implicated in the skeptical controversies of Islam. The drive to define Islam is, then, partly a drive to cast doubts on untenable claims for Islam—anthropomorphist beliefs in the case of Jahiz, philosophizing ones in the case of Ibn Taymiyya—by associating them with the theological errors of Christianity.

Notes

- 1 Albrecht Fuess, "Legends against Arbitrary Abuse: The Relationship between the Mamluk Military Elite and their Arabic Subjects," in Mahmoud Haddad, Arnim Heinemann, John L. Meloy, eds., *Towards a Cultural History of the Mamluk Era* (Beirut: Ergon Verlag Würzburg 2010), pp. 141–51. See also P.M. Holt, "The Position of the Mamluk Sultan," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 38 (1975), pp. 237–49; Denise Aigle, "Legitimizing A Low-Born, Regicide Monarch: The Case of Sultan Baybars and the Ilkhans in the Thirteenth Century," in Isabelle Charleux, Grégory Delaplace, Roberte Hamayon et al., eds., *Representing Power in Ancient Inner Asia: Legitimacy, Transmission and the Sacred* (Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University 2009), pp. 1–18; and Yaacov Lev, "Symbiotic Relations: Ulama and the Mamluk Sultans," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 13 (2009), pp. 1–26.
- 2 The classic but now increasingly outdated study of Ibn Taymiyya is Henri Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taḳī-d-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymīya, canoniste ḥanbalite, né à Harrān en 661/1262, mort à Damas en 728/1328* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale 1939).
- 3 Denise Aigle, "The Mongol Invasions of Bilād al-Shām by Ghāzān Khān and Ibn Taymīyah's Three 'Anti-Mongol' Fatwas," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11 (2007), pp. 89–120.
- 4 See Gerhard Endress, "Reading Avicenna in the Madrasa. Intellectual Genealogies and Chains of Transmission of Philosophy and the Sciences in the Islamic East," in James E. Montgomery, ed., *Arabic Theology and Arabic Philosophy, From the Many to the One: Essays in Honor of Richard M. Frank* (Leuven: Peeters 2006), pp. 371–422; and Ayman Shihadeh, "From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī: 6th/12th Century Developments in Muslim Philosophical Theology," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15 (2005), pp. 141–79.
- 5 A comparison to Sextus Empiricus has been made. See Ibn Taymiyya, *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians*, trans. Wael B. Hallaq (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992), p. xli.

- 6 Jonathan P. Berkey, "The Mamluks as Muslims: The Military Elite and the Construction of Islam in Medieval Egypt," in Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann, eds., *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1998), pp. 163–73.
- 7 Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taymīya's Struggle against Popular Religion* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton 1976). For devotion to saints in the time of Ibn Taymiyya, see Christopher S. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous* (Leiden: Brill 1999); and Richard J.A. McGregor, *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2004).
- 8 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Furqān bayn al-Ḥaqq wa-l-Bāṭil* (*The Distinction between True and False Religion*), ed. 'Amir al-Najjār (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-'Arabiyya 2006), p. 104.
- 9 Ayman Shihadeh, "The Mystic and the Sceptic in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," in Ayman Shihadeh, ed., *Sufism and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2007), pp. 101–22; and *ibid.*, "From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī: 6th/12th Century Developments in Muslim Philosophical Theology," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15 (2005), pp. 141–79.
- 10 A.L. Ivry, "Averroes on Causation," in Siegfried Stein and Raphael Loewe, eds., *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press 1979), pp. 143–56; and Barry S. Kogan, *Averroes and the Metaphysics of Causation* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1985).
- 11 On exegetical tendencies within Hanbalism, see Racha El Omari, "Kitāb al-Ḥayda: The Historical Significance of an Apocryphal Text," in Felicitas Opwis and David Reisman, eds., *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas* (Leiden: Brill 2012), pp. 419–51.
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- 34 Ibid., pp. 8–9.
- 35 Ibn Taymiyya, *Aḥādīth al-Quṣṣāṣ*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ṣabbāgh (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī 1972). See, for example, pp. 72–73, where Ibn Taymiyya, rejecting a hadith that says that the intellect is the first thing God created, notes how some use it to introduce into Islam, on the basis of "conjecture," the philosophical category of the active intellect.
- 36 Ibn Taymiyya, *Iqtidā' al-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaqīm*, p. 10.
- 37 Ibid., p. 6.
- 38 Ibid., pp. 11ff.
- 39 Ibid., p. 6.
- 40 Joseph Norment Bell, *Love Theory in Later Ḥanbalite Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1979).
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- 42 Ibid., p. 128.
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- 44 Jon Hoover, "Perpetual Creativity in the Perfection of God: Ibn Taymiyya's Hadith Commentary on the Creation of the World," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15 (2004), pp. 287–329.
- 45 Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1999), especially chapter four.
- 46 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ (The Correct Response to the Changers of the Religion of Christ)*, eds. 'Alī Ibn Ḥasan Ibn Nāṣir, 'Abd al-'Azīz Ibn Ibāhīm al-'Askar and Ḥamdān Muḥammad al-Ḥamdān, 7 vols., 2nd edition (Riyadh: Dār al-'Āṣima 1999), vol. 4, p. 385. The full quote runs as follows: "There is no Christian at all, whether in secret or publicly, who is not misled and ignorant about what he worships and about the origin of his religion. He does not know whom he worships or in what way he worships, despite the best efforts of some of the Christians in worship, asceticism, and noble character."

- 47 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-Saḥīḥ li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ* (*The Correct Response to the Changers of the Religion of Christ*), eds. ‘Alī Ibn Ḥasan Ibn Nāṣir, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Ibn Ibāḥīm al-‘Askar and Hamdān Muḥammad al-Ḥamdān, 7 vols., 2nd edition (Riyadh: Dār al-‘Āṣima 1999).
- 48 David Thomas, “Christian–Muslim Misunderstandings in the Fourteenth Century: The Correspondence between Christians in Cyprus and Muslims in Damascus,” in Mahmoud Haddad, Arnim Heinemann, John L. Meloy et al., eds., *Towards a Cultural History of the Mamluk Era* (Beirut: Ergon Verlag Würzburg 2010), pp. 13–30.
- 49 David Thomas, “Apologetic and Polemic in the Letter from Cyprus and Ibn Taymiyya’s *Jawāb al-Saḥīḥ li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ*,” in *Ibn Taymiyya and his Times*, pp. 247–65. For the quote, see p. 258. In his refutation, Ibn Taymiyya notes six claims made by the author of the letter from Cyprus: 1) that Muhammad was not sent to Christians but to the people of the age of ignorance (*al-jāhiliyya*) among the Arabs, supported by evidence from the Qur’an as well as rational argument; 2) that the Qur’an describes Muhammad as praising Christianity as practiced; 3) that the prophecies of Torah, Gospel, and Psalms offer testimony for their religion as practiced, including the idea of hypostases, trinity (Ibn Taymiyya calls it tri-theism), and God’s union with Christ, etc., testifying that it is true and should be followed since no other revelation contradicts it and reason does not reject it; 4) that all this is established by reason and that such tri-theism is indubitably backed by rational theological reflection and revelation; 5) that Christians are monotheists even with their statements about a plurality of gods as suggested in the idea of the hypostases and that these things are no different from the anthropomorphist verses in the Qur’an; and 6) that Christ came after Moses to perfect religion, making subsequent religion superfluous and unacceptable.
- 50 Elsewhere, Ibn Taymiyya says that all books (that is, scriptures) are the speech of God but that the Qur’an is best: *Jawāb Ahl al-‘Ilm wa-l-‘Imān* (*The Response of the People of Knowledge and Faith*), ed. Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb, 3rd edition (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘a al-Salafiyya 1984), p. 14: “There was no one among the righteous predecessors who said that all are the speech of God without giving priority to the Qur’an over others.”
- 51 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-Saḥīḥ*, vol. 1, p. 71, where Christians are called polytheists (*mushrikūn*).
- 52 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 78.
- 53 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 91.
- 54 Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 92–93.
- 55 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 94.
- 56 Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 184–88.
- 57 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 110.
- 58 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 91.
- 59 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 91.
- 60 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 95.
- 61 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 105.
- 62 Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 108–09.
- 63 Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 108–09.
- 64 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 124.
- 65 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 315.
- 66 Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 188–89.
- 67 Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar’ Ta’arūḍ al-‘Aql wa-l-Naql*, vol. 1, p. 6.
- 68 Ibn Taymiyya, *Kitāb al-Nubūwāt* (*The Book of Prophecies*) (Cairo: al-Ṭibā‘a l-Muniriyya 1928).
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Conclusion

To doubt ... or not to doubt

One is not a Muslim until he doubts in Allah.

Position of Ash'arism according to Ibn Hazm (d. 1054)

Is it better to face our perplexities or does doing so only lead to greater confusion? Are our beliefs something to be figured out so as to be certain of their rationally compelling nature? Or are they something that has become familiar to us over the course of the years? That is, while we cannot be certain they are true, they are *our* beliefs, and so we would rather not discard them. It is significant that we close our study of skepticism in classical Islam with Ibn Taymiyya. As we have seen, for him, beliefs were certainly not mere habit—something to which we have become accustomed from childhood. They were true so long as they came from God's true revelation as conveyed to and by the first Muslims. This does not make him a nominalist. It was his goal to demonstrate the rationality of Islam's beliefs so that they might be known with certainty, as many scholars before him had tried to do, but he set out to do so not by aligning the texts of revelation with the demands of philosophy but rather by questioning the heritage of philosophy in Islam up to his day. One is certainly not to doubt God's message as revealed to the umma. Instead, skeptical reservations are to be directed at theological speculation that conjures up things about God that God did not say about himself. How could one be so bold as to do so? And yet Ibn Taymiyya was no fundamentalist. Rather, he exerted great effort to show that the literal sense of God's message was rational on its own terms, but not in the way philosophizing scholars claimed. In this, while no obscurantist, he is distinct from Jahiz, 'Amiri, and Ghazali, all of whom embraced the philosophical heritage of Greece as it had developed in Islam since it had been translated into Arabic. In that regard, Ibn Taymiyya introduced a theological methodology, still influential today, that goes well beyond other affiliates of the school of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal for its all-encompassing, even if hostile, engagement with philosophy. Even if dismissive of the power of logic, he, too, like the other scholars featured in this study, sought to demonstrate the rationality of Islam's beliefs rather than simply accept them as inherited tradition.

The trajectory of skeptical attitudes traced in this study, from Jahiz to Ibn Taymiyya, raises a serious issue. Is there no end to all this questioning, doubting, and seeking? Can we not say anything with certainty about God: that he is on his throne even if he is not spatially limited; that Islam is uniquely true even if the ways of other communities are not entirely untrue; that the mind can know God through philosophical reflection but also cannot really know God through such reflection; and that the beliefs of Islam have a logic unlike the logic of philosophy, making them difficult—but not entirely impossible—for non-Muslims to recognize? If these are the theological vagaries into which one is forced by skepticism, it could be asked whether it is worth being skeptical in the first place. As we have seen, such formulas reflect ongoing developments in the ways Muslims have thought about God that build upon even while challenging inherited formulas, formulas that had worked for a period of time but then ceased to do so. Nevertheless, the idea that belief is a kind of knowledge that can be put into clear formulas is itself problematic, driving a ceaseless cycle where elaborate answers are given to the perplexing questions of the day only to be swept aside in the next generation for yet other explanations. It is extremely important to recall that skepticism or confusion (*hayra*) about beliefs is not rejection or repudiation (*juhūd*). To doubt is not the same thing as to deny. (It is incorrect to limit skepticism in Islam, for example, to materialists or naturalists who dismiss Islam's revelation as a source of knowledge and guidance. That is atheism of a kind, not skepticism.) However, given what seem to be the endless perplexities of belief, it could be asked whether the skeptical disposition of the human being offers anything of value in the end. Is it not better simply to accept one's beliefs because they have become dear to one's heart (or reject them because they have not)? How far are we to subject our beliefs to skeptical interrogation? If we begin to doubt them, will we forever be questioning them, always doubting them? We might end by losing our beliefs altogether. How to live without beliefs? Is it not futile to hope to figure things out? Better, then, to believe and not inquire. Why spend life confused?

This is the very point that Ibn Hazm of Cordoba (d. 1064) seeks to impress upon his fellow scholars. Born into a family with close associations to the Umayyad caliphs and remembered today as a brilliant if controversial scholar of the Islamic West, Ibn Hazm would spend his entire life in Andalusia, that is, Muslim Spain. Although he never visited Baghdad, he was conversant with the theological controversies across the Abode of Islam. A highly cultured individual, he is known for his writings on love, ethics, law, and theology, as well as the logic of Aristotle. He was also a spirited polemicist. He described Judaism and Christianity as false religions with no merit and was equally averse to beliefs and practices in Islam that could not be clearly linked to the texts of revelation. For this reason, he is sometimes remembered as a proponent of literalism, which is not quite correct. In his treatise on the varied sects of Islam and other religions, he takes up a topic closely related to skepticism. Is one really a Muslim if one has *not* undertaken theological inquiry (*istidlāl*)

so as to have proof (*burhān*) for what one believes? In other words, if one can mount no argument for what one believes, can one call it belief? Driving this question was the strong emphasis placed on knowledge in Islam. Belief is one thing, but does one really know what one believes with certainty? Is it knowledge?

Ibn Hazm focuses the discussion on Ash'arism, the major school of theology in classical Islam. As reported by Ibn Hazm, this school held that one is not truly a Muslim if one has not undertaken theological inquiry such that one can say that one really knows what one believes.¹ The question at stake was not the content of one's beliefs but one's own comprehension of them. One's beliefs may be true, but if one has not sought evidence for them through theological inquiry and argumentation, it cannot be said that one knows them with certainty. It would be more appropriate to classify them not as knowledge (*'ilm*) but as doubt (*shakk*) or supposition (*ẓann*) since, after all, one does not know them with certainty. One simply accepts them.

Using the language of skepticism, Ibn Hazm pushes the point. The process of seeking evidence—so as to offer argumentation—for one's beliefs requires that one first assume a position of doubt rather than certainty. Inquiry, after all, necessarily operates according to skeptical reservations. Only by doubting can one question what one believes as the first step towards establishing evidence by which to know one's beliefs with certainty and not only as inherited. It sounds sensible, but the idea horrifies Ibn Hazm. The upshot, he says (with words he puts in the mouths of the scholars of Ash'arism), is that “one's Islam is not sound until, upon reaching maturity [that is, the age of reason], one reaches a state of having doubts and not believing [*shākkān ghayr muṣaddiq*].”² In short, to be a Muslim, one has to begin as a skeptic. Nothing, Ibn Hazm protests, could be more destructive. To be a Muslim in this way is to cut oneself off from God since it makes doubt obligatory, as he says mockingly: “One is not a Muslim until he doubts in Allah the Mighty and Majestic, in the soundness of prophethood, and in the honesty of the Prophet.” The very idea is self-contradictory, as he queries, “Is belief not sound without unbelief?”³ In other words, to find God, you have to start from unbelief!

Ibn Hazm does not reject the importance of theological inquiry. Rather, he insists, it is not necessary in order to qualify as a believer. In his view, the scholars of Ash'arism have failed to understand what it means to receive one's beliefs on the authority of another. Ibn Hazm agrees that it is wrong to make a belief one's own simply upon hearing it from another—and especially to do so knowingly. However, one should not only accept one's beliefs on the authority of the Prophet but also do so unquestioningly. The words of the Prophet, since they come from God, have unquestionable authority. They are to be accepted without inquiry (although one does need to be sure that sayings attributed to the Prophet—hadith—are really his). Most Muslims, Ibn Hazm explains, are convinced of their beliefs simply because God has made the faith beloved to them. They need not pass through the perils of theological inquiry to reach

certainty. In sum, religion is a matter of the heart more so than it is of the head. One believes because something that God has put in one's heart makes one believe. Belief in the end is not the product of theological inquiry.

Ibn Hazm, of course, intends his words for Islam. Jews and Christians have altered their scriptures. It would therefore not make a difference if they accepted their beliefs on the authority of their prophets, Moses and Jesus, respectively. They would still end with unsound belief since their scriptures have been corrupted and no longer accurately record the teachings of their prophets. Thus, the idea that one's beliefs are sound simply by accepting them on the authority of one's prophet applies only to Islam. Only Islam's scripture has remained uncorrupted. The point of all this is that the scholars of Ash'arism have no grounds to question the faith of fellow Muslims. However, they claim that theological inquiry can lead to dogmatic assertions that all believers must accept in addition to the words of scripture. As a result, one can be charged with unbelief for failing to grasp a dogma (*i'tiqād*) that is the product of such theological reflection above and beyond scriptural texts.⁴ A person with firm belief in Islam, Ibn Hazm retorts, can only be declared a non-Muslim in two cases: if he openly denies the faith; or if the community as a whole comes to the consensus that his beliefs are not those of Islam. One cannot be branded a non-Muslim as a result of theological allegations and insinuations.⁵

To support his point, Ibn Hazm mentions the complexity of theological inquiry. It does not necessarily make one more certain. Referring to his own experience, he says that his training in theology did not make his faith more certain but only served to remind him of the certainty of the faith that God had planted in him from childhood. Belief operates at the level of the heart, not the head. He goes on to allude to the dilemma of the equivalence of evidence, a topic with which he was quite familiar as will be recalled from chapter two. Here, he only alludes to it by noting that theological inquiry can be used in support of both true and false belief. It only heightens confusion. Does theological inquiry have anything to do with faith?

This brings us back to the heart of skepticism in Islam, the idea that theological inquiry only results in a cacophony of contradictions but that without it, the result will also be a cacophony of contradictions. The dilemma was well known to Islam's scholars throughout the period of our study. One rather candid admission of it is found in the opening words of a theological treatise by Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944), a scholar who shared much with Ash'arism.⁶ He says:

We have found people differing in their creed [*madhhab*] and their religious beliefs, agreeing only on their disagreement in religion, each one stating that he has the truth while others are in falsehood. Each one claims his belief on the authority of a predecessor, but it has been established that acceptance of belief on the authority of another is no grounds for claiming certainty since others have also reached opposing claims on

this basis. There is a multitude of people who accept their belief on the authority of another. It comes to nothing if it is not known on the basis of rational argument both that he is honest in what he claims and that his proof for what he believes convinces impartial minds that he has reached the truth. If so, then the one on whose authority one accepts one's belief is right. Still, all are obliged to know for themselves the truth of what they profess as religion.⁷

In other words, Maturidi, no less than Ibn Hazm, recognizes the diversity of beliefs within Islam. However, in contrast to Ibn Hazm, who makes certainty a matter of the heart, Maturidi links it to theological inquiry. For Ibn Hazm, one reaches certainty by accepting one's beliefs on the authority of the Prophet, unquestioningly, but as Maturidi rightly observes, this has not eliminated disagreement in Islam. How are believers to know where certainty lies? In his view, certainty in the face of equally compelling but mutually competing beliefs comes only through rational argumentation. This, however, as Ibn Hazm recognized, has not resolved the dilemma, since Islam's scholars, even when equally well versed in the ways of theological inquiry, still have not come to final agreement about the beliefs of Islam. A single set of beliefs upon which all agreed remained elusive, emerging neither with theological inquiry nor without it. What to do?

This dilemma, as we have seen, very much characterizes religious discourse in Islam (perhaps also in other traditions), ever oscillating between acceptance of revelation in its literal wordings and the need for it to be rationally compelling. A literal reading of scripture results in odd-sounding beliefs, such as God having a body. This makes it necessary for scholars to clarify the meanings of revelation through reasoned reflection on God and his relation to the world. In this fashion, a set of dogmatic teachings is forged through theological reflection. However, scholars still disagree, suggesting that the mind is ultimately fallible when it comes to knowledge of God. This only generates confusion even among the learned. As a result, the likes of Ibn Hazm could conclude that certainty is more a matter of the heart than it is of the head. One is right to doubt the dogmatic assertions of scholars that have been formulated through theological inquiry beyond the literal wordings of scripture. Is the Qur'an created or uncreated? Are God's attributes, as revealed in the Qur'an, as divine as God is? Does the logic of philosophy or guidance of spiritual masters offer insight into God or should we limit our piety to our own faith and works? There are no grounds for coming to definitive answers to such questions, so it is better to listen to your heart. It is there that you will find certainty, not in your head.

The dilemma is nicely expressed in a story narrated by Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, who, it will be remembered from chapter two, was fond of ridiculing the entire enterprise of theology as a sham. In his view, it was theology that led scholars to slide into the morass of the equivalence of evidence. However, in this highly embellished story, the unnamed protagonist, a man in

his sixties, finds that his own faith (presumably Islam) is beloved to him in all its literalness even after he had accepted the impossibility of reaching certainty through theological inquiry. He recounts his affirmation of the scriptural message that believers will see God in the life to come, even if it implies that God is spatially limited, a view that would be suspect on rational grounds to those with theological expertise. Tawhidi has him recount the dilemma: Every time he tried to assert this belief that he will see God in the hereafter, someone would offer a compelling counterargument. Still, because God had cast a love in his soul for his faith, he was loath to abandon it. To get to the bottom of the matter, he sifted through countless creeds, only to find one as compelling as the next. As a result, he accepted the creed of the equivalence of evidence (*dhahaba ilā takāfu' al-adilla*), but he did so for the purpose of sticking to his deeply cherished faith and avoiding the debate and inquiry that only causes turmoil in one's soul, confessional fanaticism, and confusion (*tahayyur*). By engaging in theological inquiry, one becomes bereft of certainty in the heart. This, in turn, dangerously leaves one with no motive to undertake action for the life to come.⁸ This, of course, echoes the claim of Ibn Hazm that theological inquiry is not the source of certainty. It is as likely to come from what God has created in the heart of the believer as it does from a proof based on the rational argumentation of theology.

It is worth noting that immediately prior to this story, Tawhidi speaks of two rationalist theologians of ninth-century Baghdad. They had a habit of positing abominable ideas, for example, that it is possible for humans to sit and stand at the same time or to be simultaneously in motion and at rest. This, of course, is the type of thinking that emerged from debate over the omnipotence of God. If God is all-powerful, as he surely is, then it should be possible for him to make someone sit and stand at the same time or be simultaneously in motion and at rest. Such theological speculation, Tawhidi concludes, only makes a mockery of the faith. As a result, people do not take it seriously, and so piety disappears. The problem, he insists, is that scholars do not recognize the limits of theological inquiry. They do not realize that it is impossible for them to know everything about God; that religion is about exalting God, submitting to him, and doing good works; and that the messenger of God, Muhammad, did not speak of everything but remained silent except on matters of universal benefit. The fact that Islam's scholars delve into matters that they were never meant to consider leads Tawhidi to raise his voice in complaint to God. The scholars of the age are lost, as they fail to distinguish between error (*ghayy*) and guidance (*rushd*), the very thing the Qur'an came to clarify (as stated in Q 2:256). As a result, people only worship their whims while rejecting the real truth of God.

Herein lies the crux of the skeptical heritage in Islam: the zeal of scholars to make dogmatic assertions about God on matters where the texts of revelation are silent. Jahiz sought to do this by asserting that the Qur'an is created and that God does not have a body, but his claims were only met with the skeptical silence of the likes of Ibn Hanbal: How can one make such a claim

about God if God has not issued a position on it? And yet belief could not be obscure. The stakes were raised even higher when the theological enterprise only resulted in greater discord. The dissonance was met with a skeptical reservation about all dogmatic assertions and even about the possibility of knowing religious truth at all, a position known as the equivalence of evidence. 'Amiri endeavored to counter this skepticism by making logic the criterion to separate true from false belief. With philosophical reasoning now the arbiter of beliefs, the way was paved for the likes of Avicenna to claim that philosophers were best equipped to make dogmatic assertions about God. Ghazali, in turn, cast doubts on this claim, contending that the philosopher's allegations about God could not be known with certainty. They were possibly true, but they could not be shown to be necessarily true by the logic of philosophy itself. On the one hand, this led to learned ignorance, whereby certainty comes from mystical seeing rather than scholastic reasoning. However, on the other hand, since learned ignorance was demonstrated by scholastic reasoning, this view only reinforced the status of scholastic reasoning as the arbiter of the truths of Islam. Ibn Taymiyya could hardly contain his skeptical reservations in the face of such a claim. Were the affairs of God to be decided by the logic of Aristotle or the logic of the Qur'an? To advance his understanding of religion, he first had to launch repeated attacks on the credibility of syllogistic reasoning. Only teachings transmitted from the righteous predecessors could be accepted. All other claims, all other dogmatic assertions, were but conjecture. And so the story goes round and round. One attacks dogmatic assertions, only for one's attack to become a dogma itself. In this regard, despite differences in detail, the overall dynamic of skepticism in Islam is not unlike that of ancient skepticism, where doubt about truth claims became a dogma of its own.

So, is religion a matter of the heart or the head? Is it something that God has made beloved to the believer even if it does not always seem credible to the mind? Or is religion grounded in the nature of the human condition? That is, it is not merely a state of grace to which only the believer has access. Rather, it can be discussed and shown to have rational grounds even if debate over the finality of dogmatic assertions is never closed. Both heart and head have a claim on our beliefs, even if for different reasons. What we can say by way of conclusion is that skepticism was integral to the process of religious reasoning in the case of classical Islam. One can only imagine that this is equally true in the case of other traditions. Here, we have traversed the various theological conundrums faced by Islam's scholars during its golden age. These scholars continuously raised doubts about beliefs—and sought to resolve them: Where is God—somewhere, everywhere, nowhere? Why is Islam true, and other religions false? Does God make everything happen or does the world operate according to its own rules of causality? Is syllogistic reasoning adequate for establishing real knowledge of the truths of God?

These and other enigmas constitute the heritage of skepticism in Islam. As we have seen, in treating these questions, Islam's scholars engaged in disputation,

both to advance their own views on the nature of religion and also to rebut opposing views. Within this ongoing debate, scholars used exact terminology to question the very foundations of knowledge (that is, terms for confusion, for equally compelling but mutually contradictory evidence, for conjecture as opposed to knowledge, in addition to terms for doubt, ambiguity, and so on). There was, then, a well-defined heritage of skepticism within the scholastic world of classical Islam. This facet of Islam does not only remain largely unexplored, but it is, I contend, a better way to frame the scholarly life of classical Islam, which was not a simple clash between faith and reason struggling to give birth to a secular breakthrough that never happened. Rather, skepticism was itself a constitutive element of religious reasoning in Islam.

Therein lies the broader import of this study: the integrity of skepticism for religious reasoning. It is my hope that this study will stimulate deeper conversation about the nature of religion, especially at a time when religion tends to be associated with a fundamentalist (unthinking) impulse, often by believers no less than unbelievers. Here, I have offered evidence from classical Islam to show the central place of skepticism within religious reasoning. This study shows the importance of expanding the study of skepticism beyond the intellectual history of the West. More profoundly, this study, it is hoped, has raised vital questions about the nature of religion, suggesting not merely how doubt serves to propel religious reasoning in new directions but more so how questioning what we know (and can know) is actually a phenomenon integral to the venture of religion itself.

Notes

- 1 Polemics aside, there was some truth to his claim. See the several articles on Ash'arism in Richard Frank, *Text and Studies on the Development and History of Kalām*, ed. Dimitri Gutas, 3 vols. (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum 2005–2008).
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- 3 Ibid., p. 334.
- 4 Ibid., pp. 267ff.
- 5 Ibid., p. 268.
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